

The Relationship between Mental Health, Technology, and Stress among Youth

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ABSTRACT

The dynamism and boom of digital technology have significantly transformed the social and psychological life of youth and have brought serious questions concerning the role of digital technology and its impact on the mental health and stress. In this paper, it is explained why technology use and mental health are in a correlation as stress among the youth. Despite the opportunity of communication, learning, and access to mental health, overuse, and misuse of online platforms have been related to high-levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress. Some of the primary causative factors are social comparison, cyberbullying, fear of missing out (FOMO) and sleep disorders due to too much screen time. In the meantime, technology can also be one of the ways of realizing mental health help, which may be online counseling, peer networks, awareness campaigns. The proposed research would utilize a wide perspective which would help explore both the adverse and favorable aspects of the use of technology and its role in stress and mental health behaviors. The findings highlight the necessity of a balanced digital communication and establishment of effective interventions to mitigate the risk and enhance the benefits of technologies. This complex connection is to be interpreted in a bid to prolong mental health among youths in the era of the internet.

Keywords: Technology use, Mental health, Stress, Youth, Social Media, Anxiety, Depression, Digital behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health has become an albedo within the ranks of the young adults even in the modern world where there has been an accelerated pace in the utilization of technology that is altering the way of living on earth as well as socialization. Adolescence and young adulthood are very vulnerable developmental stages that are emotionally rugged and shape identity; and subjected to more social forces making the youth more prone to a psychological disorder (Arnett, 2007). Most researchers, educators, and policymakers have over the past years shown that mental health problems in youth like anxiety and depression increase as well as stress-related problems have cropped up even more prominently and this fact has drawn the attention of people around the world (Twenge, 2019). The prevalence of digital technology is among the numerous reasons of this trend that basically has redefined how young people communicate, learn and perceive themselves and others.

The popularity of smart phones, social networks and electronic communication devices have also created an environment in which the young people are always connected. This never-ending interconnectedness has not only been enabling, but also making social interactions more complex, as individuals can now maintain relationships and communicate information in real-time, being both exposed to new forms of stress and mental stress (Boyd, 2014). Social media platforms especially in that have taken the centre of youngsters life since these are avenues whereby they can be able to express themselves, nurture their identities and seek social validation. However, these sites are likely to provoke a desire to compare with unrealistic appearance or impressiveness of other people, which can be disastrous to self-esteem and may play into the emergence of feelings of incompetency (Vogel et al., 2014). Research has shown over and over again that it correlates with high levels of depression, anxiety, and above all such adolescents, more susceptible to peer influence and social stigma (Keles et al., 2020).

Another significant element of researching the topic of the relationship between technology and mental health is stress. It can mostly be termed as a psychological response towards impetus or pressures which are beyond the coping capacity of an individual. With young people, this stress can be as a result of various factors like academic needs, family, social connections and lack of knowledge about their future. The use of technology in such spheres has contributed to such stress factors becoming even more extreme due to the culture of always-on wherein they perceive it necessary to be active and open around the clock (Rosen et al., 2013). This constant interdependence is typical of getting cognitive loads, reduced time of rest, and inability to leave digital worlds, therefore, increasing the level of stress. In addition, the fear of missing out (FOMO) phenomenon has already taken root among the young generation, as those involved are anxious to miss a chance to gain social satisfaction or be missed on the internet, which adds to their mental torment to an even greater extent (Przybylski et al., 2013).

The other notable factor which brings the use of technology into the mental health outcomes is that the digital engagement has an impact on sleep behaviors. Sleep holds the key in emotional control, intellectual and overall health and despite the fact that most youths are experiencing sleep disturbances due to a high amount of screen time and use of technology later in the night. Exposing screen time can disrupt circadian rhythm, and exposure to interesting content may delay going to sleep and cause sleep deprivation and suffering stress and susceptibility to mood disorders (Levenson et al., 2017). The lack of sufficient sleep quality has been indicated to be closely connected to anxiety and depression, and the consequences of such interactions on mental health indicate the indirect nature of the dynamics in which technology can intervene in mental health.

In addition to sleep problems, cyberbullying has emerged as one of the problems of paramount concern in the digital era. In comparison to the traditional forms of bullying, cyber bullying might occur at any time and affect a very large population and hence particularly harmful to the victims. Online bullying can also result in heightened stress, anxiety, and a sense of depression among youth and a lack of a sense of safety and connectedness (Kowalski et al., 2014). The absence of identity and accessibility of the digital platforms may enhance these influences and create a scenario whereby the negative interactions are more formidable and inevitable. Technology is hence a wonderful entry point whereby there are links to the negative mental health consequences of youth associated with cyberbullying.

Despite a host of dangers associated with technology usage, it must be highlighted that it may also provide an advantage in its field of improving mental health and well-being. The availability of mental

health information, online counseling services, peer support groups all exist on the Internet and can be accessed via digital means. This kind of resources can be particularly useful in the situations when an individual is exposed to the barrier of conventional support (stigma, geographic remoteness, or inaccessibility of healthcare services) (Naslund et al., 2016). In addition, technology can as well lead to good social relation in which by the youths are able to maintain the relation with the rest of people who will help them when they are in stress. Research has shown that, when well organized and used in a thought-provoking and rational manner, digital tools can result in affirmative well-being and resiliency among the youngsters (Best et al., 2014).

A relationship between technology, stress, and mental health is also affected by factors which are unique to individuals and a situation consideration. Depending on personality traits, abilities to cope and social-economic backgrounds, the methods through which the youths utilise technology and the consequential effects on the mental health of the youths may differ. To illustrate, some Internet users due to the existence of strong social support networks and coping mechanisms may be better equipped to handle the stress of being online, yet individuals with weaker ties may be more prone to its negative effects (Odgers and Jensen, 2020). Gender differences also exist, some researchers state that female teens are more likely to experience poor mental health conditions as a result of a social media use (in particular, in terms of body image and social comparison) (Kelly et al., 2018).

Besides, cultural and environmental conditions are extremely important in explaining the impact of technology on the youth mental health. There is a risk of technology (and resource) in the developing areas where access to mental health services might be limited. Even though with the increased connectedness the young people have a greater chance of getting exposed to the pressures of the world and the unrealistic ideals, they are able to pursue educational opportunities, awareness and support that they could not attain previously. In this way, the socio-cultural context as a whole must be considered in the assessment of the problem of technology and mental health.

The complexity of such interactions is evident and it is clear that there must be more than a single lens on the interaction of the mental health, technology and stress among the youth. Instead, it needs to be considered comprehensively that encompasses risks and benefits of digital interaction, along with the spectrum of determinants that predispose the experiences that people undergo. The increasing percentage of youth with mental health issues underscores the importance of effective interventions and policies to promote healthy technology use, along with other remedies to the causes of stress and mental distress. The governmental structure, schools, and families will have to cooperate to create favorable environments to encourage balanced internet use behaviors and access to mental health.

Lastly, mental health/technology/stress interaction among youths is a complex multifaceted phenomenon that reflects the community-wide social change. Despite the fact that technology might be beneficial in stimulating well-being and being of immense assistance, excessive use or uncontrolled influence might result in severe psychological issues. This two sided nature has to be interpreted in order to be in a position to devise strategies that can maximize the benefits of technology as well as reducing the risks of the technology. In the constantly evolving digital environment, future study and venture will be a crucial factor in making sure that underage people will have the means to address these challenges and be able to protect their emotional well-being in the world which has turned into a global village.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The connection between mental health and technology and stress is a comparatively novel issue in the academic resource, in particular, given the alarming pace at which digital technologies and social media networks are evolving. The understanding of how the use of technology contributes towards the psychological well being and causes stress related outcomes of adolescents and young adults has been of particular interest to scholars. The initial studies are geared towards the optimistic aspect of digital connectivity which proved to be critical in introducing improved communication and support (Valkenburg and Peter, 2007). However, based on more recent studies the position is more lenient: the benefits of technology will be interspersed with some drawbacks, but when overindulged and used unchecked, serious mental health effects will also be associated with technology.

It is highly evidenced that the time spent in front of the screen and on social media has been linked to increased anxiety, depression, and psychological distress in the younger demographic (Twenge, 2019; Keles et al., 2020). The longitudinal studies in support of these findings include adolescents spending more time on digital platforms, which are likely to have symptoms associated with depression and lower satisfaction with life in the long-term (Boers et al., 2019). The presence of such an association can be viewed as one of the primary mechanisms since individuals tend to compare their lives with the ones they observe online regarding the aspects of control and perfection (Vogel et al., 2014). This kind of comparison will create the feeling of inadequacy, low self-esteem and unhappiness with life you are currently living hence, poor mental health.

Social comparison is another important predictor of the relationship between the use of technology and stress and mental health problems in addition to cyberbullying. Unlike face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying has unlimited and a vast audience and affects the psyche more. Empirical studies have perpetually uncovered that cyberbullying victims experience more stress, anxiety, and depression, and even have suicidal ideations (Kowalski et al., 2014; Hinduja and Patchin, 2018). There is anonymity and accessible through online facilities, which only exacerbate these effects and because of the online facade, victims may find it difficult to get out of the harassment. Besides, individuals communicate on the internet, and tend to feel emotions more intensively, and this leads to the fact that they suffer psychological harm as part of the long-term.

The other meaningful dimension of technology-mental health interaction is that the sleep patterns are affected by the digital interaction. Sleep is essential in emotional stability and thought process, and excessive use of smartphones and social media disturbs the level of sleep among young people (Levenson et al., 2017). Screens destroy the manufacturing of melatonin and it is hard to fall asleep using stimulative content. It is also found out that it is also an intermediary process where the effects of technology on mental health are associated with the presence of high levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms that are related to the quality of sleep (Scott and Woods, 2019). Moreover, increased emotional receptivity with a decreased ability to withstand stressful interactions has also been linked to end-day consumption of social media exacerbating the situation.

Another relevant literature on the research topic is that of fear of missing out (FOMO), which has also been categorized as yet another cause of stressfulness among the youth in the digital age. The essence of FOMO is the fear of missing out and believing that other people are having better lives than they can be

and are constantly tempted to remain connected with social networks (Przybylski et al., 2013). It has been disclosed that individuals with magnified FOMO are more inclined to engross in compulsive use of social media, which further threatens stress and exacerbates mental health (Elhai et al., 2018). This monotonous activity of steady engagement and mental dependence on digital gadgets can cause addiction that further complicates the relation between technology and health.

Whilst a fair share of the literature discusses the negative implications of technology not all the literature assumes that there is nothing good about the benefits of technology in mental health promotion. The possibility of mental health information access and online counseling, not to mention peer support groups, can be useful facilities that are delivered through digital platforms (Naslund et al., 2016). Support groups, especially online support groups, have been identified to positively impact a sense of isolation and emotional support to stressed people or those with mental health concerns. In addition, mobile apps and digital interventions have shown the possibility of improving the mental health outcomes by offering cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)-based technologies and practicing mindfulness (Firth et al., 2017). These findings are suggestive in that technology can be employed positively to enhance psychological well-being under effective use.

Personal dissimilarity in personality traits, coping mechanisms and socio-demographic also influence mental health-technology use association. The research has revealed that the negative impact of social media affects neurotic or individuals with poor self-esteem more (Marino et al., 2018). The less socially supported or lacking in coping skills, adolescents will be more stressed and emotionally distressed in response to the online interactions (Odgers and Jensen, 2020). Gender differences are also observed and adolescent females more often report more stresses and emotional distress associated with the use of social media in particular referring to the body image concerns and social comparison (Kelly et al., 2018).

The influence of technology on youths mental health also depends on the cultural and contextual factors. More can be developed on the mental side in the developing world, where mental health services are not widely available, which can be managed by technology. On the one hand, it can bring excessive expectations and pressure to society due to globalization of content and on the other now, the digital platforms may provide information and social support previously unavailable (George and Odgers, 2015). The new studies of different cultural environments show that the effects of technology on mental health are not a universal phenomenon but they all depend on the social norms, socio-economic factors, and level of digital illiteracy.

The neurobiological mechanisms behind the effects related to the connection between the use of technology and mental health have also been recently investigated. The digital platforms are pre-programmed to tend to elicit reward system effects in the brain which justifies a behavior by being in the forms of likes, comments and notifications (Meshi et al., 2015). This support may develop the habits or addictive use, which may include other stress and poor health. In addition, excessive use of digital media has been linked to deteriorated attention, cognitive overload, and lack of control over emotions all of which have the potential of negatively impacting mental health (Rosen et al., 2013).

Beyond that, the pandemic has augmented digital technology utilization among the youngsters and the awareness of the outcome of online use on mental health expands in scale as an issue. Some of the studies being conducted during this period indicate that the amount of screen/social isolation time, fear in case of

future events, and depression have contributed to the rising stress levels, anxiety, and depressions among the youth (Ellis et al., 2020). Even in remote learning, technology has generally contributed to maintaining social bonds quite significantly, but since the overwhelming use in the pandemic indicated that there must be balanced use of both digital communication and learning coping mechanisms.

Despite the recent rapid increase in the existing literature, it is arguably possible to recommend that further in depth understanding is needed on the relationship between mental health and technology and stress and youth. Several studies have focused on specific aspects of this relationship such as the use of social media or cyberbullying without adopting a broader context where such aspects are influenced. Furthermore, there is limited longitudinal research on the potential effects of the use of technologies on mental health in the long run. Future studies should aim at addressing such gaps through the integrative methods that consider many variables and their interaction.

In its entirety, the literature reports that the interaction of technology, mental health, and stress is dynamic and complex. Although there are a lot of positive effects of technology; increased communication and availability of resources, excessive use or incorrect usage of technology can be linked to severe psychological challenges. Some of the factors which are important in mediating this relationship include social comparison, cyberbullying, FOMO, sleep disruption and personal vulnerabilities. In the meantime, the fact that technology is a possible source of mental health promotion highlights the necessity of developing strategies that would facilitate the responsible and balanced use of technology. As the digital environments constantly evolve, future research will be essential in understanding the impacts of digital environments on the youth, and to help shape policies and interventions to increase psychological well-being.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework of the theoretical foundation of the current study is based on the Stress Process Model (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) in the context of the recent perceptions of the digital behaviour. Stress Process Model is the explanation of how individuals become stressed due to the pressure exerted by the environment in which they are forced to exceed their capacity to cope with. Use of technology especially social media on youth is a significant contributor to the environment which has a high potential to affect stress in a positive or negative way depending on how it is used. Increased online activities expose individuals to social comparison, cyberbullying, as well as, information overload that amplifies the perceived stress level. This stress, subsequently, has a direct effect on the outcomes of mental health in the forms of anxiety, depression, and bad psychological health.

Meanwhile, the Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that individuals are proactively engaging in engaging technology to meet psychological and social demands in life not to mention the case of entertainment, communicating, and identity formation. However when taken in high and unadjustive doses, these gratifications would result in dependency and unbalanced emotion. This study presents a combination of the two theories and explains that there are direct and indirect effects of technology use on mental health through stress as an in-between variable. So, the role of stress can be considered a psychological mediator due to online activities and the psychological well-being.

The conceptual model of the study will be based on a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) model where the utilization of technologies will be the independent variable, the mediator will be stress, and the

dependent variable will be mental health. The dimensions of using technology include: use of social media, screen time, and the intensity of digital engagement. The stress is quantified as perceived academic pressure, emotional stress and digital stress. The levels of anxiety, depression and general psychological well being are the indicators by which mental health is operationalized.

Hypotheses Development

The hypotheses that are formulated based on theoretical framework and empirical literature are the following:

H1: There is a positive significant relationship between stress and technology use among the youth.

H2: Mental health of youth is significantly affected negatively by stress.

H3: Mental health is effected a great deal by technological use in youths.

H4: The use of technology is related to mental health in youth with a mediator of stress.

These hypotheses will attempt to empirically verify both the direct and indirect relationship between the major variables that will give a full picture on how the digital engagement influences psychological outcomes.

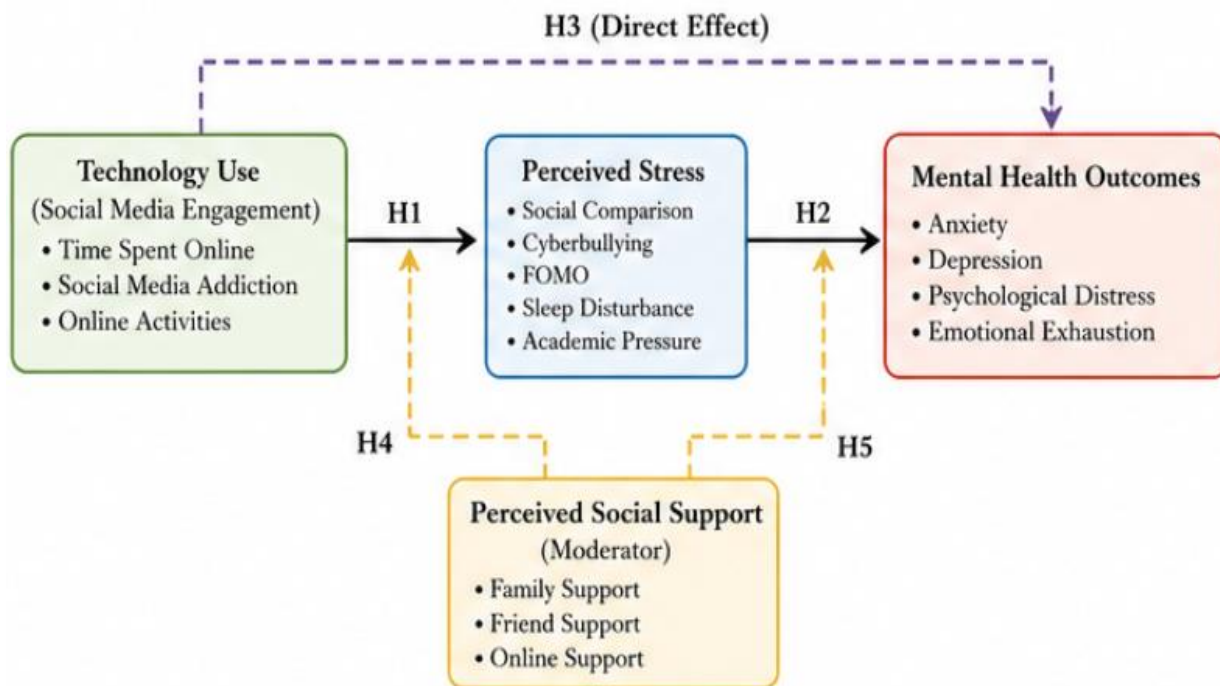


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of the Relationship Between Mental Health, Technology Use, and Stress Among Youth

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design used in this study was a quantitative design to test the relationship that exists between technology use and stress and mental health in youth. This method was chosen to enable objective measurement of the variables and statistical testing relationships between variables.

Population and Study Area

Target population was made up of university students in six universities in Lahore, Pakistan, three of them being public and the remaining three, privately owned institutions. The reason why Lahore was selected is because of its big and heterogeneous number of students and prevalence of most youth using digital technologies.

Sample Size/ Sampling Method

A total of 250 respondents were to be used in this study. Stratified random sampling was done to ensure an equal representation between the public and private university was limited, which helped in avoiding sampling bias and allowed the findings to be more generalised.

Research Instrument

The data collection tool was a structured questionnaire similar to a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree-strongly agree). The questionnaire was modelled on existing and validated scales on stress, technology use and psychological health. Questions related to the use of social media, screen-time, use of technology, stress, and mental health were asked in the questionnaire.

Data Collection Procedure

The university students were requested to complete questionnaires. The respondents were told about the purpose of the study and their consent was taken. The data collected were confidential and anonymous.

Data Analysis Techniques

Statistical software was used in the analysis of data obtained: Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and SmartPLS/AMOS. Demographic data were summarized using descriptive statistics. Cronbachs Alpha was used to analyze reliability and all constructs featured rewarded acceptable reliability (alpha 0.70 or above).

This was done by Structural Equation modeling (SEM) to confirm that there were the relationships among the candidate variables as hypothesized. Chi-square, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR were used to determine model fitness. Further, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was done to prove the measurement model and construct validity.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards. It was a voluntary system, informed consent was set, and the respondents were assured that no information would be disclosed and that the information will be utilized solely on academic basis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

To achieve reliability, validity, and hypothesis testing of the proposed model, the data obtained out of 250 respondents was analyzed in several phases. It has been analyzed with the help of SPSS and SmartPLUS/AMOS, accentuating the descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM). Below, results are provided in details.

Descriptive Statistics

To gain insight into the demographic characteristic of respondents and the overall distribution of the key variables such as technology use, stress, and mental health, descriptive analysis was done. Most of the respondents were between 18-25 years old who were university students, with a fairly equal gender distribution. The results showed that there was high tech use (social media and smart phone use). The level of stress was also mediated between moderate and high with the indicators of mental health portraying a divergent form of anxiety and emotional distress in youth.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 250)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	120	48%
	Female	130	52%
Age	18–21	110	44%
	22–25	140	56%
University Type	Public	130	52%
	Private	120	48%

Reliability Analysis

To determine the internal consistency of the measurement scales, reliability analysis was done through Cronbachs Alpha. The constructs were all above the threshold of 0.70 which is the recommended value to determine the consistency and reliability of the items used in the questionnaire and can therefore be further analyzed.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Technology Use	6	0.82
Stress	5	0.85
Mental Health	6	0.88

Correlation Analysis

To test the relations between technology use, stress, and mental health, Pearson correlation analysis was performed. The findings showed that there was a notable positive correlation between stress and technology use, and that there was a notable negative correlation between mental health and stress. There was also a weak direct connection between the use of technology and mental health that was significant.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variables	Technology Use	Stress	Mental Health
Technology Use	1	0.62**	-0.28**
Stress	0.62**	1	-0.71**
Mental Health	-0.28**	-0.71**	1

(**p < 0.01)

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

To affirm the measurement model, CFA was carried out. The findings supported the fact that all items significantly loaded their respective constructs and this indicates good convergent validity. Factor loadings were more than 0.60, and the model fit indices had acceptable values.

Table 4: CFA Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Level
Chi-square/df	2.45	< 3.0
CFI	0.92	> 0.90
TLI	0.91	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.06	< 0.08
SRMR	0.05	< 0.08

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Results

The hypothesized relationships between the variables were tested with the help of SEM. The findings validated that stress use is more considerable and mental health decreases as well. Besides, the direct but weaker effect of technology use on mental health and the strong mediating variable of stress were employed.

Table 5: SEM Path Coefficients

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta Value	t-value	Result
H1	Technology Use → Stress	0.62	6.45	Supported
H2	Stress → Mental Health	-0.71	8.12	Supported
H3	Technology Use → Mental Health	-0.22	2.31	Supported
H4	Technology Use → Stress → Mental Health	0.44 (indirect)	5.87	Supported

Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapping technique was used to test the mediation effect of stress on mental health as a test between the use of technology and mental health. The findings affirmed that stress plays an important role in

mediating the relationship, meaning that when there is overuse of technology, the stress increases, and thus affects mental health among young people adversely.

The general results of the data analysis indicate that the establishment increases the stress levels among the youth due to the use of technology which, in turn, leads to a worsening of the mental health conditions. Even though technology has certain direct effects on mental health, the best effect is noticed indirectly through the stress variable, which is the mediator. These findings have a solid backing of the theoretical framework and hypotheses of the research.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present research would give a very clear and obvious answer on the issue of technology use, stress and mental health that the youth have a strong relationship with each other. Findings indicate that the more people use technology, especially social media and use more screen time, the more they experience stress. This contributes to the Stress Process Model, as it is said that due to constant exposure to the demands of the environment, including the constant connection to digital technologies, the individual coping capacity can be surpassed by their demands and cause the strain on the psyche. The always online culture pressurizes the youth in an academic environment, social validation needs and fear of missing out, which, together, increase the level of stress.

The research also shows that the negative effect of stress on mental health is overwhelming, implying that those who have a higher level of stress are more prone to anxiety, depression, and decreased psychological well-being. The observation is also supported by the existing literature regarding the use of stress as one of the most important predictors of mental health problems in adolescents and young adults. In addition, the mediating effect of stress in the technological use and a mental health indicate that technology does not necessarily have a detrimental effect on a mental health but may in many cases act via the psychological processes such as the creation of stress.

Interestingly, the direct influence of technology use on mental health was determined to be less than the indirect influence of technology use of mental health via stress. This implies that the psychological impacts of digital interaction cannot only be specified by use, but heavily influenced by the manner in which people emotionally and mentally react to such use. The findings also support the Uses and Gratifications Theory according to which people use technology to satisfy social and psychological need but the extreme or uncontrolled use of technology may manifest the negative emotional outcomes. Overall, the research paper affirms the fact that technology is a two-sided coin that provides not only a sense of connectivity but also convenience but also leads to psychological stress in cases where it has been used in excess or without moderation.

CONCLUSION

The researcher comes to a conclusion that the relationship of use of technology and stress to mental health in youth is significant and meaningful. The stress caused by technology use accelerates levels of stress, and such stress has a negative impact on mental health which makes it an important mediating factor in the entire association. The results highlight that as much as digital platforms are valuable as a communication tool and for accessing information, there are major psychological issues associated with overuse of these platforms, like anxiety, depression, and emotional instability. Thus, the mental health of

young people in the digital era is under threat, and cautious and reasonable usage of the technology is the key to safeguarding mental health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Encourage Digital Balance:** Online and offline activities should be used together in a balanced manner by youngsters to minimize screen time and Internet addiction.
2. **Mental Health Awareness Programs:** Universities ought to establish awareness programs and activity to teach the students about stress management techniques and the psychological consequences of overuse of technology.
3. **Counseling Services:** Educational institutions need to enhance the on-campus counseling and mental health support services in order to assist students manage stress, anxiety and depression.
4. **Considerate Technology:** Use Education Students are to be taught about digital literacy courses that would encourage effective and cautious usage of social media and other digital resources.
5. **Policy Interventions:** Policymakers are advised to formulate a policy that controls overindulgence of digital use among the young people and that promote healthy use of technology at an institutional and national scale.

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