Linking Social Media Addiction, Psychological Distress and Marital Satisfaction: A Study of Married Couples

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the relationships among social media addiction, psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress), and marital satisfaction among married individuals, with a particular focus on the predictive role of social media addiction in influencing psychological distress and marital satisfaction. This research was important given the rising global prevalence of social media use and its emerging association with mental health issues and relationship challenges. Informed by prior literature, which highlighted links between excessive social media use and both psychological and interpersonal difficulties, the study employed a quantitative correlational design. A convenience sample of 300 married individuals aged 20 to 60 years (M = 21.61, SD = 3.10) was surveyed using validated tools: the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), and the Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI-32). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and regression analyses. Results revealed that social media addiction was significantly and positively associated with depression, anxiety, and stress. Regression analysis showed that social media addiction significantly predicted all three components of psychological distress. The study contributes to understanding how digital behaviors affect emotional and relational well-being. Limitations included the use of self-report measures, convenience sampling, and a cross-sectional design. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to explore causal pathways and examine potential interventions.

Keywords: social media addiction, psychological distress, marital satisfaction, depression, anxiety, stress

INTRODUCTION

Establishing relationships is a basic human necessity (Heaney & Israel, 2008), though the ways in which individuals fulfill this need can differ significantly. The rapid advancement in technology including computers, the Internet and smartphones, have introduced innovative ways for people to communicate, connect and interact. One of the most widely used platforms of information and communication technology is social media, which includes various social networking sites such as Facebook, twitter, Instagram and YouTube. These platforms offer various communication features including voice and video messaging, photo and video sharing and personal profile creation, allowing individuals to present themselves and build connections with others.

Social networking sites provide various communication opportunities that facilitate the formation of social relationships (Fuchs, 2017; Hazar, 2011; Valentini, 2015). A recent report indicated that in 2022, approximately 4.7 billion people, accounting for 59.3% of the global population, actively participated in various social media platforms (Radcliffe et al., 2023). While social media offers numerous advantages such as entertainment and enjoyment, knowledge sharing (Geirdal et al., 2021), encouragement of physical activities, it also provides a few risks. Nevertheless, the excessive use of social media can lead to adverse consequences (Griffiths, 2013; van den Eijnden et al., 2016) such as compulsive usage (Sümen & Evgin, 2021), reduced physical movements (Sofiany & Setyawati, 2021), and psychological distress (Geirdal et al., 2021), all of which can contribute to mental health challenges. This condition often termed as social media addiction, refers to the compulsive and excessive use of social media to the extent that it disrupts an individual daily life (Griffiths, 2012).

When social media use reaches an addiction level, it can hinder the establishment of face-to-face social relationships (Young, 2019; Glaser et al., 2018; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Previous literature reveals that individuals often experience persistent thoughts about desire to engage with social media, lose self-control over the use of social media, and devote excessive time to either being online or thinking about it. Consequently, this behavior negatively affects their relationships with family and friends while also interfering with their work or education (Griffiths et al., 2014; Andreassen et al., 2012). Therefore, investigating the impact of social media usage on interpersonal relationships and mental wellbeing is a significant area of study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Media Addiction and Marital Satisfaction

Previous research on social media addiction and marital relationships has grown over the years (Abbasi, 2019a; Demircioglu & Kose, 2018). Studies have shown that excessive social media use can contribute to jealousy, suspicion, and deception among married couples, negatively impacting their relationships (Abbasi, 2019b). In addition, excessive social media usage can hinder face-to-face interactions (Pollet et al., 2011; Young, 2019; Glaser et al., 2018; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Consequently, social media addiction among individuals aged 20 to 75 years can reduce relationship satisfaction by providing alternative sources of attention and emotion investment through social media platforms, which divert focus from primary relationships (Abbasi, 2019).Additionally, studies have linked social media addiction to increased relationship strain, breakups, and decreased emotional connections between partners (e.g., Abbasi, 2019a, b; Demircioglu & Kose, 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2014). Therefore, these findings highlight the negative impact of social media addiction negatively on relationship satisfaction.

Social Media Addiction and Psychological Distress

A major consequence of social media addiction is its detrimental impact on mental health. When usage reaches an addictive level, it can induce stress rather than serving as a healthy coping mechanism. This addiction often leads to social media fatigue, significantly increasing the risk of anxiety and depression (Dhir et al., 2018). While some individuals use social media to alleviate stress (van den Eijnden et al., 2016), addicts often neglect hobbies, daily routines, and close relationships (Tutgun-Unal & Deniz, 2015). As a result, they may struggle with daily functioning, task completion, and maintain relationships, ultimately facing both physical and psychological health challenges. Moreover, a meta-analysis of 13 studies found that social media addiction is strongly linked to increased level of depression, anxiety, and stress (Kales et al., 2020). In short, these findings consistently highlight the association between social media addiction and psychological distress.

Psychological Distress and Relationship Satisfaction

Psychological distress often leads to dysfunctional communication styles including criticism, defensiveness, hostility, and difficulty in active listening (Fincham et al., 2018). These communication challenges can lead to persistent conflicts creating a negative cycle that exacerbates distress and diminishes marital satisfaction. In a healthy marital relationship, couples are expected to fulfill each other's emotional needs (Willard, 2011). However, individuals experiencing psychological distress, especially those influenced by social media may become too absorbed in their own struggles to provide adequate emotional support to their spouses, ultimately leading to dissatisfaction. Existing research highlights that psychological distress including depression, anxiety and stress is a strong predictor of marital dissatisfaction (Whisman, 1999). Studies further indicate that elevated stress levels are linked to lower marital satisfaction (Bodenmann et al., 2007), while depression has been shown to negatively impact romantic relationships (Cramer, 2004; Tolpin et al., 2006). Overall, psychological distress significantly undermines relationship satisfaction by fostering emotional disconnection, poor communication, and unresolved conflicts.

The Present Study

The use of the internet and social media platforms has steadily increased over the years (Roser et al., 2020). While social media serves as a powerful tool for communication and interaction, its excessive use can have detrimental impact on daily life and overall well-being. Although social media addiction is a global concern, most research on the topic has been conducted in East Asian countries, such as China, Japan, and South Korea (Bian & Leung, 2015; Kwon et al., 2013; Tateno et al., 2019). Given the growing prevalence of social media use among Pakistani population and the unique cultural context of this study, its findings are expected to offer valuable contributions to the existing literature. Additionally, this study is among the first to explore the role of social media addiction in predicting psychological distress and marital satisfaction among married couples, making it a significant addition to contemporary research.

When social media use becomes problematic or more than usual, it can have a profound impact on mental health, making it difficult for individuals to maintain emotional well-being. Cross-sectional studies on both adolescents (Orenstein & Lewis, 2020) and young adults (Larcombe et al., 2016) indicate that social media addiction is strongly linked to higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Moreover, establishing close relationships during young adulthood plays a crucial role in emotional and social development (Orenstein, & Lewis, 2020). In this regard, martial satisfaction serves as a key indicator of a young person's ability to build and sustain healthy intimate relationships. Therefore, investigating the interconnections between social media addiction, psychological distress, and marital satisfaction among married couples will provide valuable insights into how social and psychological factors influence their mental well-being and success in building and sustaining close relationships.

Though the previous literature has examined the relationships between these variables (e.g., Keles et al., 2020; Abbasi, 2019; Larcombe et al., 2016), yet no study has simultaneously explored social media addiction, psychological distress (including depression, anxiety & stress) and marital satisfaction. Notably, there is a notable gap in literature regarding the mediating role of psychological distress in the relationship between social media addiction and marital satisfaction. Therefore, the findings of this study have the potential to expand the existing body of research, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how these variables interact. Based on the research findings and theoretical explanations, social media addiction has been found to contribute towards psychological distress and impact marital satisfaction (e.g., Agbaria & Bdier, 2021; Pettorruso et al., 2020).

This study aimed to achieve the following objectives: (1) to evaluate the relationships among social media addiction, psychological distress (depression, anxiety, stress), and marital satisfaction among married

individuals; (2) to examine the role of social media addiction in predicting psychological distress among married individuals; (3) to explore the role of social media in predicting marital satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The correlation study utilized a convenience sample of married couples. Initially, 315 questionnaires were distributed; however, 15 responses were excluded due to incompleteness and missing data, resulting in a sample of 300 married individuals aged between 20 to 60 years ($M = 21.61$ years, $SD = 3.10$). Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Data collection was conducted in a home setting using a paper-and-pencil survey, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Instruments

Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale. The Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), developed by Andreassen et al. (2017), comprises six items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1= *seldom*; 5= *very often*). The total BSMAS score ranges from 6 to 30, with higher scores reflecting greater severity of social media addiction. Previous research has confirmed scales' strong psychometric properties, including construct validity, concurrent validity, test-retest reliability, and internal consistency. In the present study, the BSMAS demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha of .78.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale. The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) is a widely used measure of psychological distress, assessing depression, anxiety and stress. It consists of 21 items, with seven items assigned to each distress category, rated on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = *never*; 3 = *almost always*). Higher scores indicate greater psychological distress. Previous research has validated the Chinese version of DASS-21, demonstrating strong psychometric properties, including construct validity, test-retest reliability, and internal consistency. In the current study, the scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency with $a = .70$ for depression, $a = .74$ for anxiety and $a = .77$ for stress subscales

The Couple Satisfaction Index-32 (CSI-32). The Couple Satisfaction Index developed by Funk & Rogge (2007), is a widely used scale to measure marital and relationship satisfaction. The scale consists of 32 items designed to comprehensively assess the quality and satisfaction with romantic relationships. The SCI-32 employs a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not-at-all*) to 6 (*completely*) where a higher score reflects greater relationship satisfaction. The total possible score on the CSI-32 ranges from 0 to 192, with scores below 104.5 suggesting significant relationship dissatisfaction or distress. Notably, items 5, 10, & 15 are reverse scored to ensure accurate assessment. The scale exhibits strong psychometric properties, demonstrating adequate internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from .92 to .95. In the current study, the scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency with $a = .92$. These reliability coefficients indicate the CSI-32 is a highly reliable and valid measure for assessing relationship satisfaction across diverse populations.

Procedure

The participants in the study were identified, approached and contacted. A booklet containing the informed consent form, demographic profile, the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) and the Couple Satisfaction Index-32 (CSI-32) was distributed among 315 married individuals. The estimated time to complete the questionnaire was 10-15 minutes. The participants of the study were approached and contacted. A total of 300 questionnaires were successfully completed, resulting in an overall response rate of 95%. However, some questionnaires were excluded due to missing or incomplete response. Prior to administering the survey, informed consent was obtained from all participants ensuring ethical compliance. Participants were also instructed to carefully read and complete the questionnaire in its entirety, without omitting any items, to maintain the accuracy

and reliability of the data.

RESULTS

Table 1*: Cronbach Alpha Reliabilities of Scales and Subscales of Present Study (n = 300)*

Scale and Subscale	No. of Items	Cronbach's alpha (α)
Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale	6	.78
Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21)		
Depression	7	.70
Anxiety	7	.74
Stress	7	.77
Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI-32)	32	.92

Table 1 shows that Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale, Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) and Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI-32) have good Cronbach's alpha reliability values ranging from .70 to .92. Values of Cronbach's alpha indicate that all instruments of present study are internally consistent and reliable measures of construct (George, 2003; Smith, 2012).

Table 2: *Pearson Product Moment Correlations among Social Media Addiction, Psychological Distress (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress) and Marital Satisfaction among Married Couples (n = 300)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Social Media Addiction	-	.18**	.16**	.18**	.02
Depression		-	.75**	.63**	-.25**
Anxiety			-	.66**	-.23**
Stress				-	-.11
Marital Satisfaction					-

*Note. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$*

Table 2 shows the result of Pearson product's moment correlation among the study variables. As anticipated, social media addiction shows a significant positive correlation with depression, anxiety, and stress, and a non-significant correlation with marital satisfaction. Two indicators of psychological distress (depression and anxiety) also show negative correlation with marital satisfaction.

Table 3: *Linear Regression Analysis of Social Media Addiction as a Predictor of Psychological Distress (n = 300)*

Variables	Psychological Distress								
	Depression			Anxiety			Stress		
Social Media Addiction	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
	.16	05	.18**	.14	.05	.16**	.16	.05	.18**

Table 3 shows the result of linear regression analyses. Variables which appeared as significant correlates of social media addiction in Table 2 (e.g., depression, anxiety, and stress) were entered in liner regression to find out their predictive strength. Results show that social media addiction emerges as the significant predictor of depression, accounting for 3 percent of the variance $R^2 = .03$, $F (1, 298) = 9.96$, $p < .01$. Social media addiction emerges as the significant predictor of anxiety, accounting for 3 percent of the variance $R^2 = .03$, $F (1, 298) = 8.07$, $p < .01$. Social media addiction also appears as the significant predictor of stress, accounting for 3 percent of the variance $R^2 = .03$, $F (1, 298) = 10.13$, $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

The rapid advancement of technology in today's world has become an integral part of human life. Some individuals, however, find it challenging to adapt to these rapid changes, which can lead to various social issues (Marino et al., 2018), psychological distress (Keles et al., 2020) deterioration of interpersonal relationships (Glaser et al., 2018; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Young, 2019). Additionally, the rising popularity of internet surfing and easier access to the internet have increased interest in understanding online addictive behaviors and their negative effects on the psychological wellbeing of adults (Correa Rangel et al., 2022; Mamun et al., 2020; Mathew & Krishnan, 2020; Stankovic et al., 2021).In the light of these concerns, the present study seeks to investigate the relationships between social media addiction, psychological distress (depression, anxiety, stress), and marital satisfaction among married individuals. Additionally, it aims to assess the predictive role of social media addiction in relation to psychological distress and marital satisfaction.

The findings of the present study demonstrate a significant positive correlation between social media addiction and psychological distress consistent with previous research (Schonning et al., 2020; Pera, 2018; Tsitsika et al., 2014) which also highlighted a strong association indicating that excessive use of social media can lead to mental health issues. Multiple factors may influence the association between social media use and symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. Individuals particularly married couples, who spend excessive time on social media often engage in unfavorable social comparisons with others, making them more prone to negative emotions related to body image, as well as feelings of envy, guilt, and regret (Marengo et al., 2018). These feelings can be detrimental to their self-esteem and have been identified as significant contributors to internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety (Thorisdottir et al., 2020; Boers et al., 2020). In another study, Dhir et al. (2018) explored that social media addiction triggers social media fatigue, leading to anxiety and depression.

The result of the present study corroborates previous empirical evidence, which consistently reports a significant inverse between social media addiction and marital satisfaction (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010; Valenzuela et al., 2014). Existing literature further posits that satisfaction is a fundamental feature of a healthy relationship, characterized by minimal conflict (Ertz & Sarigollu, 2019). In many instances, social media addiction hinders couples from utilizing early opportunities to collaboratively discuss and resolve conflicts, thereby jeopardizing marital relationship satisfaction (Cramer, 2001). The findings of the present study have been connected to the existing literature, which emphasizes that social media addiction is negatively related with marital satisfaction (Abbasi, 2019). This research suggests that excessive use of social media can lead to deception between couples, potentially damaging relationships. Furthermore, social media addiction not only fosters emotional as well as physical deception but also appears to negatively affect the quality of relationships (Demircioglu & Kose 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2014). Thus, the findings of this study align with the conclusions of previous research.

The current study confirmed the assumption that social media addiction is a significant predictor of psychological distress. Compulsive or uncontrollable use of social media has been directly associated with attention difficulties, sleep disturbances, psychological distress, and feelings of exhaustion, especially among adolescents and married individuals (Shannon et al., 2022; Boer et al., 2020). In line with earlier research (Corrêa Rangel et al., 2022), our findings confirmed the negative impact of social media addiction on various indicators of psychological distress. Moreover, numerous research findings have shown that social media addiction is a significant predictor of both psychological distress (e.g., Cauberghe et al., 2021). Considering the predictive role of a variable, it can be stated that the results of previous studies in literature are consistent with the findings of the present research.

When considering the impact of social media addiction on psychological distress, it becomes important to address social media use when designing intervention programs aimed at improving mental health.

Research shows that reducing social media addiction can positively influence mental well-being (Hou et al., 2019). Given the interconnectedness of social media addiction, psychological distress, and marital satisfaction, mental health professionals are encouraged to take a more comprehensive approach rather than focusing on a single issue. To help prevent social media addiction, couples can be taught effective Internet usage skills, and individuals can be introduced to mindfulness practices like yoga and meditation to build resilience against addiction and psychological distress. The findings of this study could be especially beneficial for professionals working in university psychological counselling centers. In this context, organizing meetings, conferences, and psycho-educational group sessions could help enhance relationship-building skills and offer activities focused on preventing social media addiction and reducing psychological distress.

This study has several limitations. First, the use of self-report scales may reduce internal reliability, which could be improved by using varied data collection methods. Second, the findings have limited generalizability due to convenience sampling. Lastly, cross-sectional design makes it difficult to determine cause-and-effect relationships, suggesting the need for experimental and longitudinal studies in future research.

CONCLUSION

This empirical study offers fresh insights into the link between social media addiction, psychological distress and marital satisfaction despite its limitations. Theoretically, the findings offer fresh insights for improving the understanding of diagnostic classifications (such as social media addiction), which remain not fully defined, as well as their impact on individual's psychological well-being. Clinically, the serious mental health consequences of internet and social media addiction should be addressed through interventions informed by scientific research on other addictive behavior, with careful consideration of gender differences. As practical implications, we advocate for initiatives aimed at preventing excessive internet and social media usage. For instance, schools, families, and informal educational organizations should create teachable moments that promote healthy internet usage and help prevent social difficulties and negative body image issues. It is also imperative to examine the long-term negative psychological impacts to understand how men and women cope over time with internet and excessive social media usage, to mitigate the impact of increasingly pervasive technology. Overall, this study enhances our understanding of addiction in the digital era and offers empirical evidence with direct implications for clinical practice and future research (such as improving the understanding and classification of emerging addictions). Additionally, it emphasizes the ongoing need to encourage healthy online behaviors. These findings particularly stress the importance of prioritizing users' overall mental and physical well-being. Overall, this study suggests that social media addiction may have a meaningful but negative impact on marital satisfaction through depression, anxiety, and stress.

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