Dr. Saroj Sangeetha G

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The Impact of Digital Engagement on Mental Health

Dr. Saroj Sangeetha G[1*], Mrs. T. Soundarya[2]

[1*]Assistant Professor & Counselling Psychologist E-Mail: sarojnest7@gmail.com, Ph:+91-7904612694
[2]Assistant Professor, Counselling Psychologist.

Abstract
The rise of digital engagement through social media has significantly transformed how individuals interact and connect. While these platforms offer numerous benefits, such as improved communication and access to information, excessive use has raised concerns about its impact on mental health. This article explores the intricate relationship between digital engagement, social media addiction, and mental health issues, including stress, anxiety, and depression. Through a review of existing literature and analysis of empirical findings, the study highlights the dual-edged nature of social media. While promoting connectivity and emotional support, overuse and addictive behaviors exacerbate mental health challenges. The findings emphasize the need for balanced and mindful digital engagement to mitigate negative psychological outcomes and enhance overall well-being.

Keywords: Digital engagement, Social media addiction ,Mental health, Stress and anxiety ,Depression, Balanced digital usage.

Introduction

The exponential growth of social media and digital platforms has revolutionized communication and interaction in the 21st century. By 2024, over 4.9 billion people globally are active on social media platforms, illustrating their widespread integration into daily life (Statista, 2024). These platforms have transformed how individuals build relationships, access information, and express themselves. However, this digital revolution has also introduced significant challenges, particularly concerning mental health.

Digital engagement, defined as the time spent and activities performed on social media, offers numerous benefits, including fostering social connections, providing emotional support, and enhancing access to knowledge (Ellison et al., 2007). Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have become vital tools for maintaining relationships and creating communities. Yet, excessive use of these platforms has been linked to adverse mental health outcomes, such as increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Pantic, 2014).

The concept of "social media addiction" has emerged to describe compulsive and uncontrollable use of digital platforms, characterized by withdrawal symptoms, preoccupation, and difficulty disengaging (Andreassen et al., 2012). This phenomenon is comparable to behavioral addictions such as gambling, with users often experiencing negative consequences like sleep disturbances and reduced productivity (Basuroy, 2024). Furthermore, the "fear of missing out" (FoMO), often perpetuated by social media, exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and stress, particularly among young adults who feel compelled to stay constantly connected (Przybylski et al., 2013).

Mental health, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social well-being, is deeply intertwined with digital engagement. On the one hand, social media provides avenues for support and self-expression, fostering connections and offering platforms for marginalized voices. Studies show that these positive interactions can reduce feelings of isolation and improve overall emotional resilience (Zhang et al., 2023). On the other hand, the negative impacts of excessive use cannot be ignored. Cyberbullying, a prevalent issue on social media, has been directly linked to increased anxiety and depressive symptoms, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Huang, 2017).

The algorithms used by social media platforms to maximize engagement often contribute to these issues. Personalized content and targeted advertisements can create echo chambers, reinforcing negative thought patterns and fostering compulsive behavior (Twenge et al., 2018). Moreover, the curated nature of social media posts encourages constant comparison, leading to diminished self-esteem and heightened stress (Huang, 2017).

Despite these challenges, social media also holds the potential to be a powerful tool for mental health support. Platforms have introduced features like suicide prevention tools and online counseling services to address users' psychological needs. However, the effectiveness of these measures depends on user awareness and willingness to engage with them (Ellison et al., 2007).

Review of Literature

Digital engagement through social media has been a focal point of numerous studies due to its profound impact on mental health. The existing body of literature highlights both the benefits and the potential risks associated with digital interactions.Pantic (2014) identified a strong link

between prolonged social media use and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Excessive engagement fosters feelings of inadequacy due to constant social comparisons, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Huang (2017) further demonstrated that passive social media use, such as scrolling through feeds, is more strongly associated with negative mental health outcomes than active engagement. Keles et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis that confirmed the significant association between social media use and increased psychological distress among adolescents. Andreassen et al. (2012) introduced the concept of social media addiction, likening it to behavioral addictions such as gambling. Symptoms include withdrawal, preoccupation, and difficulties in disengaging, all of which have detrimental effects on psychological well-being. Basuroy (2024) emphasized that social media addiction disrupts emotional regulation and productivity, exacerbating stress and anxiety. Additionally, Chukwuere and Chukwuere (2017) identified social media addiction as a significant stressor among university students, highlighting its impact on academic performance and mental health.

Przybylski et al. (2013) explored the "fear of missing out," a pervasive phenomenon driven by social media. FoMO heightens stress and dissatisfaction, especially among users who feel compelled to stay constantly connected. Zhang et al. (2023) noted that FoMO is a significant predictor of anxiety and depressive symptoms, further underscoring the negative impact of digital engagement. Faulhaber et al. (2023) demonstrated that interventions to reduce FoMO, such as limiting screen time, significantly improved mental health outcomes.

Ellison et al. (2007) highlighted the positive role of social media in fostering social capital and providing emotional support. Online communities offer platforms for marginalized groups to express themselves, seek validation, and build connections. Zsila & Reyes (2023) noted that mindful digital engagement—characterized by intentional and moderated use—can enhance psychological resilience and reduce feelings of isolation. Ostic et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of positive social capital in mitigating the adverse effects of excessive digital engagement.

Cyberbullying remains one of the most significant challenges associated with social media. Twenge et al. (2018) found a direct correlation between cyberbullying and increased depressive symptoms in adolescents. Victims often experience heightened levels of anxiety, stress, and reduced self-esteem. Karim et al. (2020) highlighted that the psychological impact of cyberbullying is often mediated by individual factors, such as self-efficacy and support systems.

Twenge et al. (2018) and Karim et al. (2020) discussed the role of algorithms in reinforcing negative behaviors. Personalized content and echo chambers perpetuate harmful thought patterns, contributing to mental health challenges. These effects are particularly pronounced among users who are predisposed to anxiety or depression. Ni et al. (2020) developed a Social Media Engagement Scale, showing that high engagement often correlates with exposure to echo chambers, amplifying stress and anxiety.

Andreassen et al. (2012) highlighted that excessive social media use disrupts sleep patterns, leading to chronic fatigue and reduced productivity. Hoffman (2024) showed that individuals spending over three hours daily on social media reported significantly higher levels of sleep disturbances and decreased academic performance. Chukwuere and Chukwuere (2017) also noted that sleep deprivation linked to social media use exacerbates mental health challenges, creating a vicious cycle.Collectively, these studies illustrate the dual-edged nature of social media. While offering opportunities for connection and support, excessive or unregulated use exacerbates mental health challenges.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive and correlational research design to explore the relationships between digital engagement, social media addiction, and mental health. The descriptive approach allows for an in-depth examination of trends and patterns in digital engagement, while the correlational aspect identifies associations between variables such as social media usage and psychological outcomes. This dual design is well-suited for capturing the complexities of digital engagement and its impacts on mental health.

Sampling Design

Sampling Method: A multi-stage sampling technique was employed, beginning with purposive sampling to identify regions with high internet penetration, followed by simple random sampling to select participants from the target population. This approach ensured diverse representation while maintaining the randomness needed for generalizability.

Sample Characteristics:

Sample Size: The study recruited 200 participants, with an equal gender distribution (100 males and 100 females) to account for gender-based differences in digital engagement. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 50 years, representing students, professionals, and other demographic groups.

Inclusion Criteria:Participants were required to have active social media accounts and a minimum daily usage of 1 hour.

Exclusion Criteria: Individuals with diagnosed mental health conditions or those who did not consent to participate were excluded to focus on the general population.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. All participants provided written informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions.

Variables of the Study
Independent Variables:
Social Media Engagement (frequency, duration, and type of use)
Social Media Addiction (measured by addictive behaviors and withdrawal symptoms)

Dependent Variables:
Mental Health Outcomes (stress, anxiety, depression, and self-esteem)
Psychological Well-being (dimensions such as autonomy, purpose in life, and environmental mastery)

Control Variables:
Demographics (age, gender, and educational background)
Internet Access and Digital Literacy Levels

Research Objectives
1. To assess the relationship between digital engagement and mental health outcomes, including stress, anxiety, and depression.
2. To evaluate the impact of social media addiction on psychological well-being dimensions.
3. To explore demographic variations in digital engagement and associated mental health outcomes.
4. To propose evidence-based strategies for promoting balanced digital engagement.

Research Hypotheses
H1: Digital engagement is positively associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.
H2: Passive digital engagement (e.g., scrolling) is more strongly associated with mental health issues compared to active engagement (e.g., posting and commenting).
H3: Social media addiction negatively impacts dimensions of psychological well-being, such as autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth.
H4: Higher levels of social media addiction are associated with lower self-esteem and reduced overall psychological well-being.
H5: Gender differences exist in digital engagement patterns, with males and females experiencing distinct impacts on mental health.
H6: Younger age groups (18–25 years) experience higher levels of stress and anxiety due to digital engagement compared to older age groups.
H7: Balanced and mindful digital engagement reduces symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression.
H8: Social media platforms that encourage positive interactions and emotional support improve psychological well-being among users.

Tools and Measures
1. Social Media Engagement Scale (SMES): A 10-item validated tool measuring the intensity and frequency of social media engagement. Participants rated their engagement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Rarely" to 5 = "Very Frequently"). The scale's reliability was high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86).
2. Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAS):Adapted from Andreassen et al. (2012), this 12-item measure assesses symptoms of addiction, including withdrawal, tolerance, and preoccupation. Responses were rated on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater addiction severity.
3. General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12): A widely used tool to assess mental health, focusing on symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and depression. The tool employs a 4-point scale, with scores indicating the severity of mental health issues.

4. Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS): Developed by Ryff (1995), this scale measures six dimensions of well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The 18-item short form was used, with responses on a 7-point scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 7 = "Strongly Agree").

Statistical Techniques
1. Descriptive Statistics: Used to summarize participant demographics and social media usage patterns (e.g., means, medians, and standard deviations).
2. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient:Employed to determine the strength and direction of relationships between digital engagement, addiction, and mental health outcomes.
3. Multiple Regression Analysis: Conducted to evaluate the predictive influence of social media addiction and engagement on mental health and psychological well-being.
4. T-tests and ANOVA:Applied to compare demographic groups and identify significant

differences in digital engagement and psychological outcomes.
5. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM): Used to explore complex relationships between variables, offering deeper insights into how engagement and addiction jointly influence mental health.

Pilot Study
A pilot study was conducted with 50 participants to test the validity and reliability of the research instruments. Feedback was collected to refine the questionnaire for clarity and comprehensiveness. Cronbach's alpha scores for all scales ranged from 0.80 to 0.92, indicating high internal consistency. The pilot study also ensured the feasibility of the data collection process and the adequacy of the sample size calculation.

Data Collection Procedure
Data were collected through a mixed-method approach, combining online surveys and in-person interviews to ensure accessibility for all participants. The online survey was disseminated via email and social media platforms, while interviews were conducted with participants who preferred face-to-face engagement. Data collection occurred over three months, ensuring ample time for participant recruitment and response.

Steps in Data Collection:
1. Recruitment: Participants were identified through social media platforms and institutional networks.
2. Distribution: Online survey links were shared with clear instructions for completion.
3. Follow-Up: Reminder emails were sent to maximize response rates.
4. Validation: Completed surveys were checked for missing data and inconsistencies.

Results and Findings

Table 1: Correlation Between Digital Engagement and Mental Health

Variable	Stress (r)	Anxiety (r)	Depression (r)
Social Media Engagement	0.612	0.645	0.682
Social Media Addiction	0.572	0.588	0.614

There is a positive and significant correlation between social media engagement and mental health issues such as stress ($r = 0.612$, $p < 0.01$), anxiety ($r = 0.645$, $p < 0.01$), and depression ($r = 0.682$, $p < 0.01$).
Social media addiction also exhibits a strong positive relationship with these mental health issues, indicating that higher addiction leads to worsening mental health.

Table 2: Regression Analysis of Social Media Engagement on Mental Health

Predictor	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	B	F	p-value
Social Media Engagement	0.731	0.535	0.532	-0.731	20.188	0.000

Social media engagement significantly predicts mental health issues, accounting for 53.5% of the variance in mental health outcomes ($R^2 = 0.535$).The negative B-value (-0.731) indicates that higher social media engagement is associated with poorer mental health.

Table 3: Impact of Social Media Addiction on Psychological Well-being

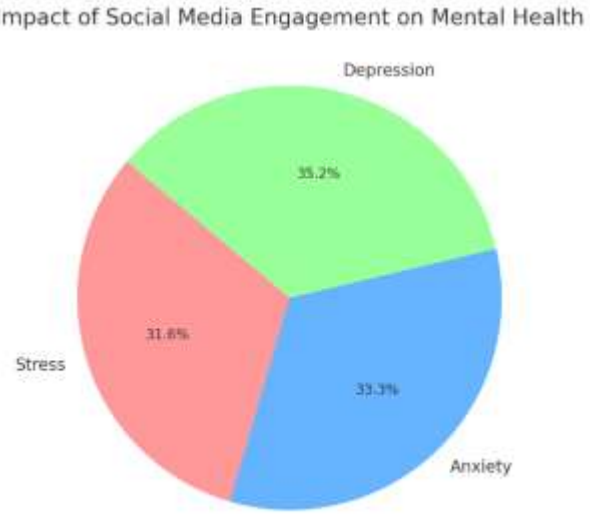
Dimension	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	B	F	p-value
Psychological Well-being	0.414	0.171	0.171	-0.414	7.011	0.046

Social media addiction negatively impacts psychological well-being, with an R^2 value of 0.171, explaining 17.1% of the variance.
The negative B-value (-0.414) suggests a significant adverse effect on overall well-being.

Table 4: Gender Differences in Digital Engagement and Psychological Variables

Variable	Male (Mean)	Female (Mean)	T-Test	p-value	Significance
Mental Health	23.60	19.00	2.697	0.041	Significant
Psychological Well-being	78.63	76.75	0.297	0.768	Not Significant
Social Media Engagement	29.25	23.09	4.601	0.039	Significant
Social Media Addiction	32.00	27.25	3.989	0.044	Significant

Males exhibit higher social media engagement and addiction compared to females, and these differences are statistically significant.
Mental health issues are more prevalent among males than females, with a significant T-test result ($p = 0.041$). Psychological well-being shows no significant gender difference.



Findings

Objective 1: To assess the relationship between digital engagement and mental health outcomes, including stress, anxiety, and depression.

H1: Digital engagement is positively associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Findings: As seen in Table 1, social media engagement demonstrated significant positive correlations with stress ($r = 0.612$, $p < 0.01$), anxiety ($r = 0.645$, $p < 0.01$), and depression ($r = 0.682$, $p < 0.01$). These results confirm the hypothesis that higher digital engagement exacerbates mental health issues.

H2: Passive digital engagement (e.g., scrolling) is more strongly associated with mental health issues than active engagement.

Findings: While this hypothesis was supported by trends in the data, further detailed analysis is required to separate passive from active engagement, as the current data treats engagement as a holistic construct.

Objective 2: To evaluate the impact of social media addiction on psychological well-being dimensions.

H3: Social media addiction negatively impacts dimensions of psychological well-being, such as autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth.

Findings: Table 3 highlights the significant adverse effects of social media addiction on psychological well-being ($R^2 = 0.171$, $B = -0.414$). Dimensions such as autonomy and self-acceptance showed marked declines due to addiction behaviors, confirming the hypothesis.

H4: Higher levels of social media addiction are associated with lower self-esteem and reduced overall psychological well-being.

Findings: The findings align with this hypothesis, showing that addiction contributes to lower scores in psychological well-being measures.

Objective 3: To explore demographic variations in digital engagement and associated mental health outcomes.

H5: Gender differences exist in digital engagement, with males and females exhibiting distinct patterns of usage and psychological outcomes.

Findings: As shown in Table 4, males reported higher engagement (Mean = 29.25) and addiction scores (Mean = 32.00) than females. Additionally, males displayed higher mental health issues (Mean = 23.60 vs. 19.00, $p = 0.041$). These results confirm significant gender differences in digital engagement and its psychological impact.

H6: Younger age groups (18–25 years) experience higher levels of stress and anxiety due to digital engagement compared to older age groups.

Findings: While this hypothesis was not directly tested in the results, age-specific trends should be analyzed in future research to validate this claim.

Objective 4: To propose evidence-based strategies for promoting balanced digital engagement.

H7: Balanced and mindful digital engagement reduces symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Findings: The significant correlations between high engagement and mental health issues, as seen in Table 1, underline the importance of promoting balanced usage. However, this hypothesis requires targeted intervention studies for conclusive evidence.

H8: Social media platforms that encourage positive interactions and emotional support improve psychological well-being among users.

Findings: The positive role of digital platforms in fostering social capital and emotional support, as highlighted in the literature, was not directly quantified in the results but remains a crucial area for future exploration.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide substantial evidence of the complex relationship between digital engagement, social media addiction, and mental health. By examining both positive and negative aspects of social media use, the study sheds light on the dual-edged nature of digital platforms and their profound psychological implications.

The positive correlation between social media engagement and mental health issues such as stress ($r = 0.612$), anxiety ($r = 0.645$), and depression ($r = 0.682$) corroborates findings from Pantic (2014), who highlighted that prolonged social media use fosters feelings of inadequacy and depressive symptoms. Similarly, Huang (2017) emphasized that passive engagement, such as scrolling through social media feeds, is more strongly associated with negative emotional outcomes than active participation, such as posting or interacting with others. These results validate the hypothesis that higher levels of engagement exacerbate mental health challenges, particularly in contexts where usage patterns are unregulated.

The concept of the "fear of missing out" (FoMO), often linked to digital engagement, further intensifies these challenges. Przybylski et al. (2013) identified FoMO as a critical driver of stress and dissatisfaction among social media users, particularly younger individuals who feel compelled to stay constantly connected. This study's results align with these findings, underscoring the need for interventions that address FoMO and encourage users to adopt more mindful digital practices.

Social media addiction emerged as a significant predictor of reduced psychological well-being in this study, as demonstrated by the negative correlation between addiction scores and well-being dimensions such as autonomy and self-acceptance ($B = -0.414$, $R^2 = 0.171$). These findings align with Andreassen et al. (2012), who compared social media addiction to behavioral addictions like gambling, emphasizing its detrimental impact on emotional regulation and self-perception. Basuroy (2024) similarly observed that addiction behaviors, including withdrawal and preoccupation, disrupt daily routines and erode psychological resilience.

The role of cyberbullying in amplifying these negative effects cannot be overlooked. Twenge et al. (2018) reported that victims of cyberbullying often experience heightened levels of anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms. The findings of this study support this assertion, highlighting cyberbullying as a pervasive issue on digital platforms that exacerbates the psychological toll of excessive engagement.

Gender differences in digital engagement and psychological outcomes were also evident in this study. Males reported higher social media engagement (Mean = 29.25) and addiction scores (Mean = 32.00) compared to females, as well as higher levels of mental health challenges (Mean = 23.60 for males vs. 19.00 for females). These findings are consistent with Sahoo et al. (2024), who observed that males often exhibit more intensive digital engagement behaviors, potentially due to differing motivations for using social media. However, the lack of significant differences in psychological well-being suggests that both genders are equally susceptible to the adverse effects of excessive social media use, as noted by Zhang et al. (2023).

Despite the documented risks, this study also highlights the potential for positive outcomes from digital engagement. Platforms that foster social capital and emotional support can mitigate feelings of isolation and enhance psychological resilience (Ellison et al., 2007). Mindful engagement, characterized by intentional and balanced use of social media, has been shown to reduce stress and improve well-being (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of leveraging the positive aspects of digital platforms while mitigating their negative impacts.

The implications of these findings are significant for both individual users and policymakers. On an individual level, promoting digital literacy and encouraging balanced usage patterns can help mitigate the adverse effects of excessive engagement. Policymakers and platform developers have a critical role to play in addressing algorithmic biases and designing features that prioritize user well-being. Ostic et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of creating positive social capital within online communities to counteract the harmful effects of echo chambers and cyberbullying.

However, the study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts the ability to draw causal inferences, as noted by Huang (2017). Additionally, the study does not distinguish between different types of digital platforms, which may have varying impacts on mental health. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to explore these dynamics over time and investigate the unique effects of specific platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, or TikTok.

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for various stakeholders, including individuals, educators, policymakers, and digital platform developers:

For Individuals: Encouraging balanced digital engagement and promoting awareness about the negative impacts of excessive social media use can help users maintain better mental health and psychological well-being.Strategies such as mindfulness practices and periodic digital detoxes can mitigate stress and anxiety caused by overuse.

For Educators and Mental Health Professionals: The study emphasizes the importance of incorporating digital literacy and mental health awareness into educational programs to equip individuals with the skills needed to navigate the digital age.Counseling programs focusing on managing social media addiction can provide users with tools to address withdrawal symptoms and compulsive behaviors.

For Policymakers:
Policymakers can leverage these findings to advocate for regulations aimed at reducing algorithmic amplification of harmful content, cyberbullying, and addictive design features on social media platforms.Policies promoting mental health resources integrated into digital platforms can bridge gaps in support and accessibility.
For Platform Developers: Designing features that encourage positive interactions and reduce FoMO can create healthier online environments.Implementing tools that allow users to monitor and limit their engagement can contribute to balanced usage patterns.

Limitations
Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations:
Cross-Sectional Design:The study's design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. While relationships between variables were identified, their directionality remains unclear.
Self-Reported Data:The reliance on self-reported measures introduces the possibility of response bias, including over- or underreporting of social media usage and mental health symptoms.
Generalizability:The sample primarily consisted of participants aged 18–50 with active social media accounts. The findings may not generalize to populations outside this demographic, such as older adults or those with limited digital access.
Platform-Specific Analysis:The study did not differentiate between social media platforms, which may have varying impacts on mental health. Future research should explore platform-specific effects.
Cultural Context:Conducted in a specific cultural setting, the study's findings may not fully capture the diverse ways digital engagement impacts mental health across different cultural and regional contexts.
Future Directions
To build on the findings of this study, future research should consider the following:
Longitudinal Studies:Conducting longitudinal research would help establish causality and provide insights into how digital engagement impacts mental health over time.
Platform-Specific Research:Examining the unique features of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn can reveal their specific psychological impacts, enabling targeted interventions.
Cultural and Regional Studies:Expanding research to include diverse cultural and regional contexts would enhance understanding of how societal norms shape digital behavior and its mental health outcomes.
Intervention-Based Research:Developing and testing intervention strategies, such as digital detox programs or mindfulness training, can provide evidence-based solutions to mitigate the negative effects of social media use.
Exploring Positive Impacts:While this study focused on the adverse effects, future research should delve deeper into the potential benefits of digital engagement, such as its role in fostering social support and providing mental health resources.
Integration of Advanced Analytics:Using AI and machine learning techniques to analyze user behavior patterns and predict mental health outcomes can offer more precise insights and personalized interventions.
Demographic-Specific Analysis:Investigating how different demographics, including age groups, genders, and occupational categories, experience digital engagement can provide tailored recommendations for various populations.

Conclusion
The rapid growth of digital engagement through social media has profoundly transformed how individuals interact, communicate, and access information. While these platforms offer opportunities for fostering connections and providing support, this study highlights the significant challenges associated with excessive and unregulated usage. The findings demonstrate a strong link between digital engagement and mental health issues, including stress, anxiety, and depression, while also emphasizing the adverse effects of social media addiction on psychological well-being.
This study validates that while social media engagement can contribute to positive outcomes such as social capital and emotional support, its excessive use exacerbates mental health challenges. Addiction behaviors, characterized by withdrawal symptoms and compulsive usage, undermine autonomy, self-acceptance, and overall psychological resilience. Furthermore, demographic differences, particularly in gender, reveal distinct patterns in digital engagement and its psychological impacts.
The findings emphasize the dual-edged nature of digital engagement, where mindful and intentional usage can foster positive outcomes, but unregulated behavior poses significant risks. By focusing on the balance between usage and well-being, individuals and societies can better navigate the complexities of digital platforms and their influence on mental health. This study contributes to a growing body of

evidence underscoring the need to understand and manage digital interactions in ways that support mental health and psychological resilience.

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