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The Impact of Social Media and Smartphone Addiction on the Quality of Interpersonal Relationships among University Students

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Abstract

The research examined how social media along with smartphone addiction affects university student relationships. Data collection employed semi-structured interview methodology while thematic analysis served as the method of data evaluation. The analysis included five individuals made up of five females who participated by purposive sampling methods. Detailed interviews were conducted with all participants following the acquisition of informed consent. The qualitative themes are: emotionally detached social media conversations, communication gaps in family relationships through social media, online communication increases misunderstandings, offline reconciliation is better than online reconciliation, social media destroys the authenticity of in-real-life moments, curated identities: concealing the true self in social media, lack of nonverbal cues in social media: loss of facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures, daily use of social media – average of 5 hrs, difficulties with reducing the number of social media use, heightened relational value by way of online presence. Research results demonstrate how digital media use affects relationship patterns despite revealing the necessity to find proper technology usage balance to preserve wholesome communication habits.

Keywords: Social Media Addiction, Smartphone Addiction, Interpersonal Relationships, University Students, Qualitative.



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Introduction

The continual expansion of social media platforms and smartphones in society has drawn significant research focus on the relationship changes between students in universities. This population which heavily interacts with digital technologies at present encounters both upsides and disadvantages from their perpetual online connectivity. New evidence shows these communication and information platforms contribute to mental health problems and face-to-face interaction decline as well as addiction development.

Phubbing represents a critical issue as people commonly choose smartphones above spending time with their nearest contacts. The practice of smartphone use during in-person conversations leads to reduced relationship satisfaction and creates more relationship conflicts. The research by Roberts and David (2022) showed that people who suffered from partner phubbing experienced lower relationship satisfaction and greater relationship conflicts which demonstrates smartphone overuse destroys personal relationships.

Advancements in social media application design makes significant contributions to addictive behavior development. Chen et al. (2021) tested through mixed-methods investigation that university students developed habitual checking habits because of app design elements utilizing endless scrolling with personalized notifications. Applications with such design elements result in prolonged screen time that replaces valuable social contact between people.

The use of social media platforms and smartphones creates deep and extensive effects on people's mental health. Research published in the *Journal of Public Health* in 2023 studied 27 studies alongside more than 120,000 participants to identify an established link between smartphone problems and depression (Vahedi & Saiphoo, 2023). The research conducted by Mulansky et al. (2022) revealed a direct link between social media engagement and depressive symptoms that developed during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

Young adults currently pursue digital detoxification even though social media dominates our world. McCrindle Research conducted a 2024 nationwide survey showing that 86% of Generation Z users tried decreasing their social media time while 57% showed unhappy emotions about social media's existence (McCrindle Research, 2024). People are starting to realize that social media damages mental health and social bonds so they now examine their device usage patterns.

According to Raudaskoski et al. (2019) "sticky media devices" explain how smartphones create problems in maintaining authentic face-to-face social connections. The powerful qualities of smartphones keep people persistently focused on their devices so they cannot completely join immediate social interactions according to their research. Such behavioral patterns create inferior social exchanges while separating individuals from their social circles.

The exceptional connection features and information capacity of social media platforms and smartphones create challenges to interpersonal relationships among university students when used to excess. A complete understanding of the interrelationships between addictive application designs along with mental health problems and diminished face-to-face communication is urgently needed. Qualitative research methods will be implemented to investigate the effects digital consumption patterns have on university social relations while delivering detailed information about this phenomenon.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research approach to investigate how university students' interpersonal relationships are affected by social media and smartphone addiction. The research method of qualitative analysis enables investigators to explore the complete understanding of how participants experience and perceive their behaviors and responses in their natural social environment (Creswell & Poth, 2021). The researchers employed phenomenology to collect participant experiences about their digital age interactions and relationships among social groups. Researchers performed semi-structured interviews for collecting detailed descriptions of data through an approach that maintained integrity in following emerging theoretical frameworks (Smith et al., 2022).

Population and Sample

The chosen participants for this research came from different departments at Government College University Faisalabad located in Pakistan. The research used purposive sampling because it helped researchers identify participants who frequently engage with smartphones and social media platforms throughout their days. A total of five subjects participated as research participants which aligns with the set criteria of university students within an 18-to-25-year age range and constant social media platform use.

Participants

The researcher chose participants from a population of those willing to describe their experiences of social media usage together with how it shaped their relationships with others. Participants granted their informed consent before the interviews to maintain proper ethical research operations. Each participant had different origins which generated extensive insights about the research matter.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis served as the method to analyze qualitative results obtained from interview data collection. The established approach for qualitative research data analysis allows investigators to locate and examine meaningful data connections (Braun & Clarke 2022). QDA Miner Lite (version 2) software served as the platform for importing verbatim interviews and conducting systematic coding across transcripts. The 20 themes derived from initial coding evolved into major super themes. The systematic methodology enabled researchers to base their interpretations on participant stories and trace universal trends throughout their experiences.

Procedure

It proved rewarding to study how social media and smartphones affect personal connections between university students. A team of five individuals who come from different departments at Government College University Faisalabad participated in one-on-one semi-structured interview sessions. All interviewees consented to recording as well as the sharing of their stories during the session. All interview recordings underwent verbatim transcription after completion. The researchers transferred recorded interview data into QDA Miner Lite (version 2) for qualitative study. Ten themes were generated by thorough coding of every transcription line. The study generated key super themes that the research team presents in the results section.

Results and Findings

Description of Themes

Emotionally Detached Social Media Conversations

The lack of emotional depth of online talks was one of the serious concerns expressed by the participants. They explained that many times social media interactions do not convey the actual emotions thus it is hard to determine the feelings of a person. And as one of the participants said: “We can’t understand emotions effectively in online chat” (P3, DU:46). In the same way, another participant outlined the distinction between virtual and real-world conversations, “The real emotions that we feel in face-to-face conversations cannot be experienced online” (P4, DU:22).

The inability to read emotions online was one of the themes raised by participants. As one of the interviewed people puts it, “It is hard to judge people’s emotions in online communication” (P4, DU:36). Another participant stated the difference between online and in-person conversations and said that, “Social media conversations feel emotionless whereas face-to-face interactions lead to healthy and meaningful discussions” (P5, DU:22). These reactions indicate that social media lacks the emotional depth and color that face to face conversations contain instinctively.

Communication gaps in family relationships through social media.

Participants were uniform in saying how too much engagement on social media create emotional distance between family members. In spite of physical presence people are usually mentally unattached. One of our participants wrote: “The people, who are physically present with us, such as our family and friends, face a widening communication gap and this ultimately affects our relationships” (P1, DU:34). Rather than engaging in face to face discussion, they spend most of the time watching YouTube or Instagram. As one had identified: “We spend our time on YouTube and Instagram instead of talking to family members who are sitting right next to us” (P1, DU:44).

Interviewee told, “Even when we are sitting with family, we are still holding our phones and neglecting them completely” (P5, DU:31). This is particularly painful to parents. “A mother prepares food; the children are taking it while holding the mobile phones. She stands there, watching, as she realizes that they do not have time to talk to her” (P4, DU:30). Based on these findings, social media engagement if at excessive levels decreases family interactions thus cause one to feel emotionally detached and less united to the family.

Online Communication Increases Misunderstandings

The online communication was emphasized by the participants to be somehow confusing since there was no clarity in text-based interactions. One of them shared her personal experience, and she says, “Many times I have failed to communicate my point effectively through text messages, which led to misunderstandings with the other person” (P1, DU:40). This depicts the way lack of vocal tone and non-verbal clues during digital interaction can lead to misinterpretations.

Another respondent noticed that “Most online arguments happen because of misinterpretation of messages as people do not get to fully understand the message that someone is trying to convey” (P3, DU:48). This implies that digital communication is not subtle as face to face discussions hence it prompts to cause misunderstandings. As in another case, another interviewee suggested the barriers of communication within the online conversations as follows: “In online communication, we either fail to explain our point properly or fail to understand the other person, which leads to misunderstandings and conflicts” (P4, DU: 45). Such revelations mean that the online discussions

especially in the form of textual messaging, are not void of situations that lead to misunderstandings thus likelihoods of disputes and compromising the social relations.

Offline Reconciliation is better than Online Reconciliation.

Participants asserted that face to face as opposed to online resolution of conflicts is much effective. They believed that, offline reconciliation will provide emotional presence, sincerity, and better perception between individuals. One participant said, “I believe that offline reconciliation is better because you are able to see if a person truly does have an intention of making peace and with physical presence the resolution is from the heart” (P1, DU:54).

Another participant agreed to this opinion and pointed out the clarity that comes with in-person discussions. “Offline reconciliation is better since in case of conflict you have an opportunity of sitting and explain your point clearly” (P3, DU:52). These responses hint at the fact that actual presence and emotional teasers in the offline settings help in greater conflict resolution than digital communication constraints.

Social Media Destroys the Authenticity of In-Real-Life Moments.

Participants contemplated on how the impatience of taking moments and posting them on social media most of the time dries away the real happiness of living the moments. One of the participants noted, “People are losing the real essence of life. Instead of enjoying the happiness of the present moment they get involved into showing it to others” (P1, DU:28).

The second interviewee pointed out that the digital validation becomes a hindrance to the authentic enjoyment: “People would spend so much time to get a perfect picture, then working on uploading it nicely and by which people would lose the real happiness of the moment” (P4, DU:30). These findings show that the desire to portray an idealized life in social media overshadows true, lived experiences thus not only decreasing emotional presence, but also real-life satisfaction.

Curated Identities: Concealing the True Self in Social Media

The participants expressed their fears about the way people usually reflect a fake self on social media, thus forming a gap between the real and virtual identities. One of the participants said, “People sometimes make a non-existent identity to portray them as another human being” (P2, DU:26).

Another respondent agreed to this opinion as he/she said, “Social media doesn’t represent real life because people don’t show their true personality there” (P4, DU:24). The possibility to conceal real emotions and characteristics online was considered to be one of the main reasons for reduced trust, as one of the participants put it, “Online, you can hide your true personality, fake everything like your emotions, your feelings; so it’s harder to trust others” (P5, DU:46). Such views explain how digital platforms promote curated personas which frequently conceals sincerity and consequently promotes the establishment of shallow relations and undermined trust in online dealings.

Lack of Nonverbal Cues in Social Media: Loss of facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures.

The lack of nonverbal communication – facial expressions, tone, eye contact, gestures – in social media prevent emotional clarity and mutual understanding”, participants said. “In online conversations, there is no facial expression or eye contact thus the other person can interpret the message in anyone’s way” (P3, DU:48).

They added, “In communication, our tone and body language are also important in addition to verbal language, but those things are not available in online conversations” (P3, DU:50). Another participant expressed a greater fear saying “even our parents who gave birth to us cannot understand emotions and expressions in online conversations so well then how can some else understand us then?”. (P2, DU:40).

The significance of face-to-face interaction was further enforced by saying, “When we sit and talk face-to-face with eye contact, the conversation becomes more effective” (P2, DU:46). These reflections show how digital communication is poor in human expression and has tendencies of misunderstandings and emotional detachments.

Daily use of social media – average of 5 hrs.

According to the respondents, they not only used social media on a daily basis, but also used it on a significant amount with an indication of its prominence in their daily routines. One stated “I use social media for around 4 to 5 hours a day” (P1, DU:12), another confessed “I spend approximately 8 to 9 hours daily on social media” (P2, DU:12).

The average length of use was also high throughout the period, as one of the participants reported, “I use it for about 5 to 6 hours each day” (P3, DU:12). In the same way, another participant said “I mostly use it for 6 hours a day” (P5, DU:16). These statements reveal a play of the same pattern of long screen times, where prolonged social media usage has become part of the norm in the lives of university students, which may affect their interpersonal communication and mental health.

Difficulties with Reducing the Number of Social Media Uses

Some of the participants acknowledged being over-addicted to social media and making attempts to cut down the use with minimal success. One of the participants said, “I have tried several times to reduce my social media use” (P1, DU:72) which shows repeated efforts of breaking the habit. Another gave the reasons for their retrenchment: “I tried reducing the number of hours I spent on social media as it was affecting my eyesight” (P2, DU:54).

The problem of controlling usage was also coupled with conscious efforts, as one of the participants said, “I have tried different substitutes to reduce my social media use, such as reading books instead” (P3, DU:61).

These answers imply that even though the respondents are aware of the negative outcomes of being absorbed in social media use, they seem unable to break out of the habit permanently. This theme reveals the addictive nature of digital platforms as well as the challenge of staying self-regulatory for the users.

Heightened Relational Value by Way of Online Presence

The respondents mentioned that a greater perceived value and strength of interpersonal relationships are gained from constant availability on social media. “If you are always available to each other through social media, the relationship becomes stronger and the value increases” says one of the participants (P1, DU:66). Another expressed the same thought, saying that, “Social media positively affects our value in each other’s eyes when we are always available to one another” (P3, DU:58).

Such responses reveal that a regular online presence and accessibility are understood as caring and responsible behaviour, in contemporary relationships. The continuity of digital contact provides the feeling of closeness; the participants construed it as a factor that increases the strength of relational connections and social value. This theme is an expression of the way social validation

and closeness of relationships are nowadays frequently judged using digital engagement and availability.

Discussion

The present research attempted to discover more about the effect of addiction to smartphones and social media on the quality of interpersonal relationships of the university students. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews found a tangled interplay between digital engagement and relational dynamics. One of the findings was the disconnection that the students felt during social media conversations that were usually “shallow” and “insincere.” This is consistent with previous studies revealing that such nonverbal cues like facial expression and tone are useful while emotional communication is lacking in online forums (Raudaskoski et al., 2019). There were consistent reports that online platforms made it harder for participants to understand emotions and this made exchanges emotionally vacuous and helped destroy social bonds.

Another major theme was the adverse impact of social media on familial communications. Participants pointed out that overuse of smartphones usually led to an emotional disconnect from the family members even when physically together. This is consistent with Roberts and David’s (2022) results regarding “phubbing,” where people turn away from others to their devices, lowering relationship satisfaction and increasing conflict. Correspondingly, participants reported on the family meal at which meaningful interaction was replaced by silent scrolling, and this confirms the worry that smartphones destroy the old ways of bonding. The research is further strengthening the emerging realization that when taken to extremes, digital habits erode intimate inter-household relations.

Moreover, the research has found out that social media can further the chances of misunderstandings in the absence of vocal and physical cues during the online communications. The participants also explained many instances in which messages were misconstrued causing unnecessary conflicts. This is in agreement with the previous literature on the limitations of text-based communication in depicting subtle intent (Vahedi & Saiphoo, 2023). In addition, the preference of face-to-face reconciliation of the participants implies that physical presence and nonverbal signals are valuable for resolution of interpersonal tensions. Offline encounter was considered to be more honest and fruitful in building trust, in accordance with the previous findings determining the prominence of embodied interaction for conflict resolution (Mulansky et al., 2022).

Interestingly enough, however, most of the findings indicated a harmful role of the social media in relationships, while at the same time participants have seen some relational benefits of the social media. Some said it helped stay in relational proximity and express emotional involvement in other people through the fact that they are always online. This duality illustrates the ambivalence of the digital communication, as it could produce as well as contravene connection with its habits of use. Chen et al. (2021) argue that the structure of the social media platforms is designed to promote continued usage hence difficult to balance. Participants in the present study enunciate challenges in controlling usage of their devices despite being aware of its adverse outcomes while reflective of the general discussion on digital addictions and the necessity of digital well-being strategies. These results recommend that further interventions should not only target screening time control but should also entail teaching young people a mindful and healthy type of social media consumption.

Conclusion

This qualitative research looked at how social media and smartphone addiction impact interpersonal relationships among university students. Thematic analysis identified areas of concerns, which included emotional disconnection, gaps in communication among families and miscommunication has heightened in online communications. Participants reported a preference for offline communication – they said it is emotionally honest and helpful in solving conflicts. These results reflect earlier findings that excessive usage of Smartphones may interfere with the relational satisfaction and emotional presence (Roberts & David 2022; Raudaskoski et al., 2019). Regardless of the downsides, relational advantages of consistent online presence were also recognized by the participants. But, the balance that exists between connectivity and meaningful interaction is still a problem. As argued in Chen et al. (2021), addictive platform designs lead to excess consumption and drowned self-regulation. This study highlights the need for urgent awareness and interventions to nudge people to digital healthier habits and reestablish authentic interpersonal relationships.

Recommendations

The universities should introduce the digital well-being workshops to help the students learn how to use social media in a mindful manner, communicate face to face, and develop techniques for the limitation of addictive practices.

Future Directions

Subject of future inquiry should be long-term psychological consequences of social media overuse using bigger and more diverse sample and incorporating quantitative measurements alongside qualitative ones.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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