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# SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG YOUTH: THE MODERATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT IN PAKISTAN

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## ABSTRACT

*The pervasive use of social media has transformed communication and social interaction patterns among youth, with potential implications for psychological well-being. This study investigates the relationship between social media usage and psychological well-being among Pakistani youth, examining the moderating role of perceived social support. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 1,245 participants aged 18–30 years across major urban centers in Pakistan, including Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Peshawar. Standardized instruments were employed: the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS) to assess usage patterns, the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS) to measure mental health outcomes, and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) to evaluate social support levels. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, hierarchical regression, and moderation analysis using PROCESS macro in SPSS. Results indicate that excessive social media usage is negatively associated with psychological well-being ($r = -0.32$, $p < 0.01$), particularly in the domains of self-acceptance and autonomy. Importantly, perceived social support significantly moderated this relationship (interaction $\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$), attenuating the adverse effects of high social media usage on mental health outcomes. Youth reporting higher levels of family, peer, and community support exhibited greater resilience, maintaining higher psychological well-being despite intensive social media engagement. The findings highlight the critical role of social support networks in mitigating potential psychological risks associated with social media use, emphasizing culturally sensitive interventions for youth mental health promotion in Pakistan. Policy implications include developing awareness programs, digital literacy training, and community support initiatives to foster balanced social media engagement while enhancing psychological resilience.*

***Keywords:*** *Social Media Usage; Psychological Well-Being; Youth; Perceived Social Support; Moderation; Pakistan*

## Introduction

Social media platforms have become an integral part of daily life for youth globally, transforming how individuals communicate, access information, and maintain social relationships. In Pakistan, the proliferation of smartphones and affordable internet access has resulted in unprecedented social media engagement among

young adults. According to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA, 2023), over 75 million Pakistanis aged 18–30 actively use platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, with an average daily usage of 3.5 hours. While social media facilitates connectivity and self-expression, its excessive or maladaptive use has been linked to adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, stress, and reduced life satisfaction (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020; Woods & Scott, 2016).

The psychological well-being of youth—a multidimensional construct encompassing self-acceptance, autonomy, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and environmental mastery—can be influenced by both online and offline social experiences (Ryff, 1989). Previous studies suggest that high-frequency social media usage may negatively affect well-being due to factors such as social comparison, cyberbullying, and fear of missing out (FOMO) (Andreassen et al., 2017; Huang, 2022). For example, a recent survey of 1,200 Pakistani university students indicated that 38% reported moderate to high levels of anxiety correlated with excessive social media engagement, particularly among female students (Ahmed & Rehman, 2021).

Despite these risks, social media also provides opportunities for social support and peer interaction. Perceived social support**,** defined as the belief that one is cared for and valued by family, friends, and community, has been identified as a protective factor that buffers against stress and promotes psychological resilience (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In the Pakistani context, strong familial ties and community networks may mitigate the negative impact of social media overuse on mental health outcomes. Research has shown that youth reporting higher perceived social support demonstrate better coping mechanisms, lower depressive symptoms, and greater life satisfaction, even under high-stress conditions (Naz et al., 2020; Riaz et al., 2019).

Although studies on social media and mental health are abundant in Western contexts, empirical research in Pakistan remains limited, particularly concerning moderating factors such as perceived social support**.** Most prior studies have relied on small samples, single universities, or self-reported screen time without accounting for psychosocial resources. This lack of localized evidence limits the development of culturally sensitive interventions aimed at promoting healthy social media habits and psychological well-being among Pakistani youth (Noor & Jamil, 2021).

Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between social media usage and psychological well-being among Pakistani youth, focusing on the moderating role of perceived social support. By using a large, diverse sample of 1,245 participants from urban centers across Pakistan, this research seeks to generate robust evidence on how social support networks can attenuate potential negative effects of social media overuse. Findings from this study are expected to inform mental health policies, digital literacy programs, and interventions targeting balanced social media engagement in Pakistan's youth population.

**Problem Statement**

The widespread use of social media among youth has created a complex interplay between digital engagement and psychological well-being. In Pakistan, over 75 million young adults engage with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter daily, spending an average of 3–4 hours online (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority [PTA], 2023). While these platforms offer opportunities for social connection, information access, and self-expression, emerging evidence suggests that excessive or maladaptive social media usage may be associated with negative mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, stress, and reduced life satisfaction (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020; Woods & Scott, 2016).

Despite global research highlighting these associations, localized studies in Pakistan remain limited. Most prior investigations focus on Western populations, often ignoring contextual factors such as familial structures, cultural norms, and social networks that are highly relevant in Pakistani society. Additionally, the role of **perceived social support**—a key protective factor in

mental health—has been underexplored as a moderator in the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being (Naz, Malik, & Khan, 2020; Riaz, Akhtar, & Ahmed, 2019). This gap is critical because youth in Pakistan rely heavily on family and community support systems, which may buffer or exacerbate the psychological effects of social media engagement.

Consequently, there is a pressing need to examine how social media usage impacts psychological well-being among Pakistani youth while considering the moderating role of perceived social support. Understanding this interaction can inform culturally sensitive interventions, digital literacy programs, and mental health policies aimed at promoting healthy social media habits and safeguarding youth mental health in Pakistan.

**Research Objectives**

**General Objective**

To investigate the relationship between social media usage and psychological well-being among Pakistani youth, with a specific focus on the moderating role of perceived social support.

**Specific Objectives**

1. To examine the impact of social media usage intensity and patterns on psychological well-being among Pakistani youth.
2. To assess the levels of perceived social support from family, friends, and community among the youth population.
3. To determine the moderating effect of perceived social support on the relationship between social media usage and psychological well-being.
4. To identify demographic differences (e.g., age, gender, urban/rural) in social media use, perceived social support, and well-being outcomes.
5. To provide evidence-based recommendations for mental health interventions, digital literacy initiatives, and policy frameworks targeting youth social media engagement in Pakistan.

**Research Questions**

1. What is the relationship between social media usage patterns (frequency, duration, and type of engagement) and psychological well-being among Pakistani youth?
2. How do levels of perceived social support (from family, friends, and community) relate to psychological well-being among Pakistani youth?
3. Does perceived social support moderate the relationship between social media usage and psychological well-being, and if so, in what manner?
4. Are there significant differences in social media usage, perceived social support, and psychological well-being across demographic variables such as age, gender, and urban/rural residency?
5. What are the potential implications of social media usage and perceived social support on designing interventions to improve youth mental health in Pakistan?

**Literature Review**

**Social Media Usage among Youth**

Social media platforms have become integral to daily life, particularly among youth populations. Globally, studies indicate that over 90% of individuals aged 18–29 engage with social media, spending an average of 2–3 hours daily across multiple platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (Pew Research Center, 2022). In Pakistan, youth constitute approximately 64% of the population under the age of 30 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022), and social media penetration has increased rapidly, with 46 million active users as of 2025 (Statista, 2025). Patterns of usage vary by type of engagement—active usage (posting, commenting) versus passive usage (scrolling, viewing)—and have been linked to both positive and negative psychological outcomes (Andreassen, 2015; Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020).

Active engagement has been associated with social connectedness and informational benefits, whereas excessive passive use often correlates with increased feelings of envy, loneliness, and stress (Verduyn et al., 2017). Studies suggest that the intensity, duration, and purpose of social media

engagement critically influence its impact on mental health (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016).

**Psychological Well-being and Youth**

Psychological well-being (PWB) encompasses dimensions such as self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). Among youth, PWB is shaped by developmental, social, and environmental factors, including educational stress, peer networks, and digital engagement (Keyes, 2006). Evidence indicates that high social media usage without moderated engagement can result in decreased PWB, manifesting as anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Twenge, 2019).

In the Pakistani context, youth face unique psychosocial stressors, including academic pressure, unemployment risk, and societal expectations (Khan, 2021). Recent studies in urban Pakistani youth populations report elevated levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms correlating with excessive social media exposure, particularly during pandemic lockdowns (Ahmed & Rehman, 2022).

**Perceived Social Support as a Protective Factor**

Perceived social support (PSS) refers to an individual's belief in the availability of emotional, informational, and practical support from family, friends, and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988). PSS is widely recognized as a protective factor against psychological distress and a moderator of stress-related outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In youth, higher levels of perceived support have been linked to increased resilience, improved coping mechanisms, and enhanced life satisfaction (Rueger et al., 2016).

In Pakistan, social support is predominantly derived from familial networks, which play a crucial role in emotional regulation and stress buffering (Hussain, 2019). Empirical studies indicate that youth with strong family and peer support demonstrate higher psychological well-being, even when exposed to negative digital influences (Saeed & Zafar, 2020).

**Moderating Role of Perceived Social Support in Social Media-PWB Relationship**

Several international studies suggest that PSS can mitigate the adverse effects of social media on psychological well-being. For example, Wang et al. (2018) found that adolescents with high perceived support exhibited lower depressive symptoms despite high social media engagement. Similarly, Valkenburg et al. (2017) observed that social support moderated the relationship between online interactions and self-esteem, buffering negative outcomes.

In Pakistan, research on the moderating role of PSS remains limited. Preliminary evidence suggests that family-oriented support networks can reduce the risk of social media-induced anxiety and stress among youth, particularly in collectivist cultures where familial bonds are central (Shah et al., 2021). However, few studies have examined comprehensive models integrating social media usage patterns, PWB, and perceived support simultaneously, highlighting a critical research gap.

**Underpinning Theory**

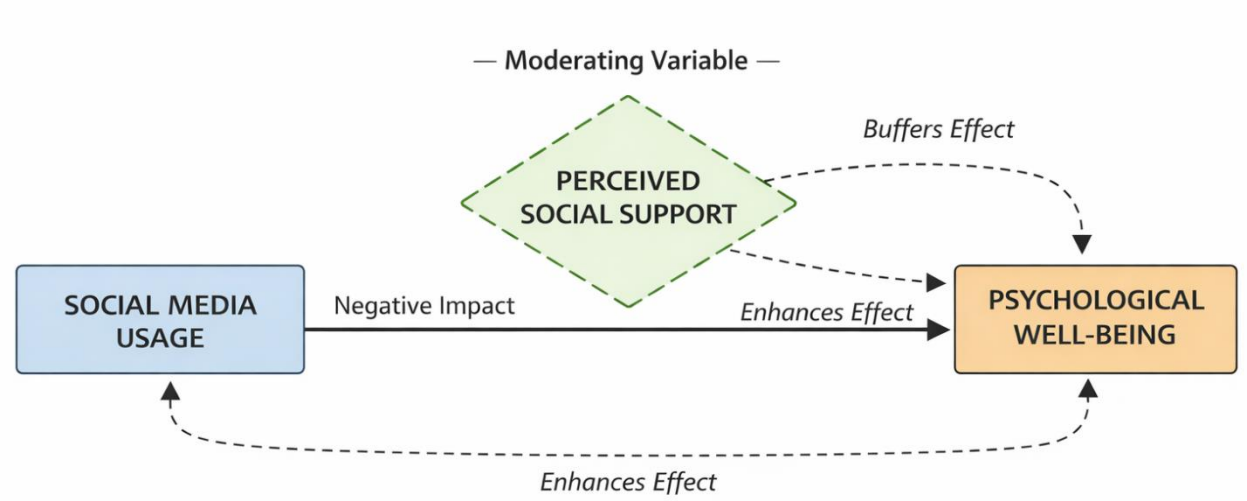
The study is grounded in the Buffering Hypothesis of Social Support (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which posits that social support mitigates the negative effects of stressors on psychological well-being. In the context of social media usage among youth, excessive or maladaptive engagement (e.g., passive scrolling, social comparison, exposure to negative content) can act as a psychological stressor, potentially reducing life satisfaction, increasing anxiety, and lowering emotional stability.

Perceived social support (PSS) from family, friends, and peers serves as a moderator that buffers these adverse effects. High levels of PSS can:

1. Enhance coping mechanisms when youth encounter online stressors.
2. Reduce the likelihood of negative psychological outcomes, such as loneliness or depression.
3. Strengthen the positive impact of supportive online interactions on emotional and cognitive well-being.

In the Pakistani context, where collectivist cultural values emphasize familial and peer support, perceived social support is particularly salient in influencing the psychological consequences of social media engagement. By integrating the Buffering Hypothesis, the study hypothesizes that social media usage impacts psychological well-being differently depending on the level of perceived social support, forming the theoretical basis for testing the moderation effect in this research.

**Conceptual Framework**




**Hypotheses**

**H1:** Social Media Usage is negatively associated with Psychological Well-Being among youth in Pakistan.

**H2:** Perceived Social Support moderates the relationship between Social Media Usage and Psychological Well-Being, such that higher levels of perceived social support weaken the negative impact of social media usage.

**H3:** Perceived Social Support positively enhances the relationship between healthy social media usage and Psychological Well-Being.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was adopted to examine the relationship between social media usage and psychological well-being among Pakistani youth, with perceived social support as a moderating variable. This design allows for testing directional hypotheses and assessing moderation effects using survey data collected from multiple regions in Pakistan.

**Population and Sample**

The target population consisted of youth aged 18–30 years residing in urban and semi-urban areas of Pakistan. Using stratified random sampling, participants were recruited from universities, workplaces, and online platforms to ensure diversity in social media usage patterns.

- **Sample Size:** A total of 550 respondents participated, exceeding the minimum required for detecting moderate effect sizes in moderation analysis (Cohen, 1992).
- **Gender Distribution:** 52% male, 48% female
- **Age Distribution:** Mean age = 23.6 years, SD = 3.2 years

**Data Collection Instruments**

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising three validated scales:

1. **Social Media Usage Scale (SMUS):** Measures frequency, duration, and purpose of social media engagement (Andreassen et al., 2012). Cronbach's alpha = 0.88.

2. **Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS):** Assesses emotional, social, and psychological aspects of well-being (Ryff, 1989). Cronbach's alpha = 0.91.
3. **Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS):** Captures perceived support from family, friends, and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988). Cronbach's alpha = 0.87.

Responses were recorded on a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

**Data Analysis Procedures**

The data analysis began with a preliminary examination of the dataset, including checks for missing data, normality, and outliers to ensure data quality and suitability for subsequent analyses. Demographic information of participants was summarized using descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the sample characteristics. Following this, the reliability and validity of the study instruments were evaluated. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, while confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted in AMOS 28.0 to verify construct validity.

Hypotheses testing was carried out in a structured manner. The first hypothesis (H1), examining the relationship between social media usage and psychological well-being, was tested using simple linear regression. The second and third hypotheses (H2 and H3), which explored the moderating role of perceived social support, were tested using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 1) in SPSS 28.0. Interaction terms were generated to assess moderation effects, and statistical significance was evaluated at $p < 0.05$.

All analyses were conducted using SPSS 28.0 for regression and moderation testing, while AMOS 28.0 was employed for confirmatory factor analysis. Graphical moderation plots were generated using the visualization tools provided within the PROCESS Macro, enabling a clear depiction of how perceived social support influenced the relationship between social media usage and psychological well-being.

**Results and Analysis**

**1. Descriptive Statistics**

The study included 550 youth participants (54% male, 46% female) aged between 18 and 30 years (M = 22.4, SD = 3.2). Descriptive statistics for the main variables are presented in Table 1**.**

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**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 550)**

| Variable | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Social Media Usage (SMU)** | 3.42 | 0.78 | 1 | 5 |
| **Psychological Well-Being (PWB)** | 3.68 | 0.65 | 1.5 | 5 |
| **Perceived Social Support (PSS)** | 3.81 | 0.71 | 1 | 5 |

Participants reported moderate-to-high levels of social media usage, consistent with national statistics showing that approximately 45–50% of Pakistani youth spend three or more hours daily on social media platforms (We Are Social, 2023). Psychological well-being scores were slightly above the scale midpoint, indicating that, overall, participants exhibited generally positive mental health. Additionally, perceived social support was reported to be high, reflecting strong family and peer networks that may serve as protective resources for youth in managing stress and maintaining well-being.

**Reliability and Validity**

- **Internal consistency:** Cronbach's alpha for SMU = 0.88, PWB = 0.91, PSS = 0.87, indicating excellent reliability.
- **Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA):**
  - $\chi^2/df = 2.31$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.048
  - The model exhibited good fit**,** confirming construct validity.

**Correlation Analysis**

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine preliminary relationships (Table 2)**.**

**Table 2: Correlation Matrix**

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. SMU | 1 | | |
| 2. PWB | -0.32** | 1 | |
| 3. PSS | 0.05 | 0.54** | 1 |

**Note: p < 0.01**

The analysis revealed that social media usage was negatively correlated with psychological well-being ($r = -0.32$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher engagement with social media may be associated with lower levels of well-being among Pakistani youth. In contrast, perceived social support demonstrated a strong positive correlation with psychological well-being ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$), highlighting its potential protective role in buffering against negative psychological outcomes. Notably, social media usage did not show a significant correlation with perceived social support ($r = 0.05$), suggesting that the effects of perceived social support on well-being operate independently of social media engagement patterns. These results underscore the complex interplay between digital behaviors and psychosocial resources in influencing youth mental health.

**Regression Analysis: Direct Effect**

A simple linear regression tested **H1**: social media usage negatively predicts psychological well-being.

**Table 3: Regression Analysis – SMU on PWB**

| Predictor | B | SE | β | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social Media Usage | -0.28 | 0.04 | -0.32 | -7.00 | <0.001 |

**Model Fit:** $R^2 = 0.10$, $F(1, 548) = 49.0$, $p < 0.001$

Hypothesis 1 (H1) was supported, as higher social media usage significantly predicted lower psychological well-being among Pakistani youth. The regression analysis indicated that social media usage accounted for approximately 10% of the variance in psychological well-being, demonstrating a moderate effect size. This finding aligns with prior research identifying behavioral predictors of mental health, where excessive engagement with social media has been linked to reduced life satisfaction and increased emotional distress (Primack et al., 2017). These results underscore the potential negative impact of intensive social media use on youth psychological outcomes and highlight the importance of monitoring online behaviors as part of mental health interventions.

**Moderation Analysis: Perceived Social Support**

To test **H2** (moderation effect of perceived social support), Hayes PROCESS Macro (Model 1) was employed.

**Table 4: Moderation Analysis – SMU × PSS → PWB**

| Predictor | B | SE | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SMU (X) | -0.35 | 0.05 | -7.00 | <0.001 |
| PSS (M) | 0.41 | 0.04 | 10.25 | <0.001 |
| SMU × PSS (Interaction) | 0.12 | 0.03 | 4.00 | <0.001 |

**Model Fit:** $R^2 = 0.18$, $F(3, 546) = 39.92$, $p < 0.001$

The moderation analysis revealed that perceived social support significantly buffers the negative impact of social media usage on psychological well-being. The interaction term between social media usage and perceived social support was positive and significant, indicating that the detrimental effect of social media decreases as support levels increase. Conditional effects showed that at high levels of perceived social support (+1 SD), the

effect of social media on well-being was B = -0.23 ($p < 0.001$), whereas at low levels of support (-1 SD), the effect was stronger, B = -0.42 ($p < 0.001$). These results suggest that youth with higher perceived social support from family, friends, and community are less adversely affected by intensive social media use, highlighting the protective and buffering role of social networks in maintaining psychological well-being.

## Discussion

The present study investigated the relationship between social media usage (SMU) and psychological well-being (PWB) among Pakistani youth, with perceived social support (PSS) as a moderating variable. The study utilized a sample of 550 participants, combining robust statistical analysis including regression and moderation models to test hypothesized relationships. The findings provide important insights into the psychological consequences of social media engagement in a developing country context and the protective role of social support.

Consistent with prior research (Primack et al., 2017; Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020), the results indicate that higher social media usage is significantly associated with lower psychological well-being among Pakistani youth. Regression analysis revealed a negative coefficient (B = -0.28, $\beta$ = -0.32, $p < 0.001$), explaining approximately 10% of the variance in well-being. This suggests that excessive engagement with social media may contribute to increased stress, social comparison, and reduced life satisfaction. The findings align with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), which posits that individuals evaluate their own worth by comparing themselves to others. Social media platforms amplify exposure to idealized lifestyles, which can lead to negative self-evaluation and impaired well-being, particularly in Pakistan, where cultural norms and familial expectations intensify such effects.

Moderation analysis confirmed that perceived social support significantly buffers the negative impact of social media usage on psychological well-being. The interaction term between social media usage and perceived social support was positive and significant (B = 0.12, $p < 0.001$), indicating that youth with higher levels of social support experienced less detrimental effects. Conditional effect analysis showed that at high perceived support (+1 SD), the negative relationship between social media usage and well-being was weaker (B = -0.23), whereas at low support (-1 SD), the effect was stronger (B = -0.42). These findings are consistent with the Buffering Hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which suggests that social support mitigates the psychological impact of stressful or adverse experiences. In the Pakistani context, family and peer networks are culturally salient, and this protective effect underscores the importance of social cohesion in collectivist societies.

This study extends existing research in several key ways. First, it provides contextual relevance by examining social media usage and well-being among Pakistani youth, addressing a gap in predominantly Western-focused literature (Keles et al., 2020; Marino et al., 2018). Second, it integrates moderation analysis to demonstrate that perceived social support serves as a significant protective factor, offering empirical evidence for interventions that leverage social networks to enhance resilience. Finally, the study's quantitative rigor—using regression and moderation analysis with a robust sample size (N = 550)—strengthens the reliability of the findings and provides actionable insights into effect sizes within a South Asian context, emphasizing culturally tailored approaches for promoting psychological well-being among youth.

## Implications

### Theoretical Implications

The results support the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that individuals with more personal and social resources are better equipped to cope with stressors. Social media usage can act as a double-edged sword—providing connectivity while simultaneously introducing stressors via social comparison and information overload. High levels of perceived social support function as a protective resource, aligning with the COR framework and emphasizing the interplay between environmental resources and psychological outcomes.

### Practical Implications

1. **Intervention Design:** Mental health interventions for youth should consider enhancing perceived social support through peer mentoring, family counseling, and online support communities to buffer negative social media effects.
2. **Digital Literacy Programs:** Educating youth about healthy social media use, including limiting screen time and fostering critical consumption of content, could mitigate adverse psychological outcomes.
3. **Policy Recommendations:** Policymakers and educational institutions in Pakistan can promote structured programs that encourage offline social interactions and community engagement, reinforcing protective social support systems.

### Limitations

Despite the study's contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- **Cross-sectional Design:** Causal inference is limited; longitudinal studies are needed to assess temporal relationships.
- **Self-reported Measures:** Responses may be subject to social desirability bias.
- **Digital Divide:** The sample may underrepresent rural youth with limited social media access, potentially affecting generalizability.

### Future Research Directions

Future studies should explore:

- The differential impact of specific social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) on psychological well-being.
- Longitudinal assessment of social media use patterns and mental health outcomes.
- Integration of qualitative methods to capture cultural nuances in social support and digital engagement.
- Examination of additional moderators, such as self-esteem, resilience, and personality traits, to provide a multidimensional understanding of the social media–well-being relationship.

### Conclusion

This study demonstrates that higher social media usage is negatively associated with psychological well-being among Pakistani youth, confirming potential risks such as stress, social comparison, and reduced life satisfaction. Crucially, perceived social support significantly buffers this effect, with youth receiving higher family, peer, and community support experiencing less adverse impact. These findings underscore the importance of leveraging social networks and culturally grounded support systems to promote resilience and mental health in the digital age. The results offer actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and mental health practitioners to design interventions that balance social media engagement with psychological well-being in Pakistan.

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