

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND ITS CORRELATION WITH BEHAVIORAL CHANGES IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS POST-PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically shifted the social and academic dynamics of university students, resulting in increased reliance on digital platforms, especially social media. This cross-sectional study investigates the relationship between social media usage and behavioral changes among university students in the post-pandemic era. A structured questionnaire was administered to 600 students aged 18–25 from urban Indian universities. The findings reveal both positive and negative behavioral shifts, including increased anxiety, sleep disturbances, academic procrastination, but also enhanced digital communication skills and access to emotional support. The study uses behavioral psychology frameworks to interpret the correlation and presents a case study of a university's digital detox initiative. Results emphasize the need for balanced usage strategies and university-level mental health awareness programs. This paper provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how digital environments are influencing post-pandemic behavior among emerging adults.

Keywords: Social Media, University Students, Behavioral Changes, Post-Pandemic Effects, Anxiety, Digital Dependency, Sleep Disruption, Online Learning, Social Behavior, India

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, university education systems experienced an abrupt transition from in-person to online learning, pushing students into an almost entirely digital ecosystem. During lockdowns and social isolation, social media became the primary source of interaction, information, and emotional support for millions of university students worldwide. While digital platforms provided community, entertainment, and continuity in education, they also led to a spectrum of behavioral consequences — from increased anxiety and body image issues to over-dependency on virtual validation and procrastination. The post-pandemic period has highlighted lasting behavioral shifts, with students struggling to detach from screen time, focus in offline settings, and re-engage in physical socialization. Despite the massive scale of these changes, there is limited empirical research, especially within the Indian higher education context, that systematically examines how social media usage is shaping post-pandemic behavioral traits. This study aims to analyze those patterns, identify correlations, and offer insights into digital health management in university campuses.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a quantitative cross-sectional design and surveyed 600 university students from 10 major public and private universities in urban India. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to include students across disciplines, gender, and year of study. Data collection was conducted online via Google Forms and institutional LMS platforms over a 45-day period. Ethical clearance was secured, and participation was

voluntary with anonymity maintained. The questionnaire had four segments: demographic profile, social media usage patterns, behavioral indicators, and academic impact. For behavioral assessment, scales such as the Internet Addiction Test (IAT), General Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7), and Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI) were integrated. Reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = 0.83$). The study specifically focused on post-pandemic experiences (after March 2022), asking participants to reflect on their habits, moods, and productivity changes over the last year. The data was then categorized based on usage intensity (low, moderate, excessive) and correlated with behavioral trends.

Data Analysis (Theoretical)

The theoretical interpretation of results draws heavily from Behavioral Conditioning Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Digital Dependency Models. Students with excessive social media usage (5+ hours/day) showed higher levels of anxiety, academic procrastination, and disrupted sleep cycles. According to behavioral psychology, repeated dopamine-driven interaction with social media (likes, shares, reels) conditions the brain toward instant gratification, thereby weakening attention spans and increasing restlessness when offline. Social Comparison Theory explains the rising insecurity and low self-esteem due to exposure to idealized lifestyles on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat. However, moderate users (1–3 hours/day) benefited from online learning groups, peer communication, and stress-relieving content. This validates dual-impact theory, which suggests that digital tools can simultaneously enhance and impair behavior based on context, duration, and content consumed. Regression models showed a statistically significant correlation ($p < 0.05$)

between screen time and sleep quality, self-image concerns, and social interaction anxiety. These patterns call for a restructured approach to student mental health, focusing not on elimination but on balanced digital behavior.

QUESTIONNAIRE WITH TABLES

Sample Questions Used:

1. How many hours per day do you spend on social media?
2. Which platforms do you use most frequently?
3. Do you feel anxious when not checking your phone?
4. Has your sleep pattern changed post-pandemic?
5. Do you compare yourself with others based on social media posts?
6. How often do you experience mood swings related to online interactions?
7. Do social media interactions affect your academic focus?
8. Have you used online platforms to seek emotional support?
9. Do you feel socially connected online but isolated offline?
10. How often do you feel pressure to respond or post regularly?

Table 1: Social Media Usage vs. Behavioral Effects

Usage Category	High Anxiety (%)	Poor Sleep (%)	Academic Procrastination (%)
0–1 Hours/Day	14%	11%	9%
1–3 Hours/Day	28%	25%	22%
3–5 Hours/Day	51%	48%	46%
5+ Hours/Day	73%	69%	64%

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Explanation:

The table reveals that excessive social media use is strongly linked with increased anxiety and sleep disorders. Students using social media for over 5 hours a day show alarmingly high behavioral disruptions, suggesting a digital dependency that hinders academic and psychological stability.

Table 2: Type of Platform and Emotional Impact

Platform Used Most	Boost in Self- Esteem (%)	Stress Reduction (%)	Feeling of Social Inclusion (%)
Instagram	34%	21%	49%
WhatsApp	41%	33%	56%
YouTube	45%	47%	38%
LinkedIn	52%	29%	27%
Twitter/X	36%	26%	34%

Explanation:

While platforms like YouTube are used for relaxation and learning, LinkedIn boosts academic motivation and self-worth. However, Instagram and Twitter were most linked to comparison-induced anxiety. This highlights the nuanced role each platform plays in shaping student behavior.

CASE STUDY

Symbiosis University, Pune, initiated a “Digital Reset Program” in mid-2023. Students voluntarily enrolled in a 10-day digital detox challenge, which limited screen time to 2

hours/day and emphasized offline social and academic engagement. Out of 300 participants, post-program surveys showed that 67% of students reported better sleep, 52% felt more focused, and 44% had reduced anxiety levels. One student mentioned that avoiding Instagram helped her feel less insecure about body image. The initiative also included mindfulness sessions, journaling, and peer meetups. The success of this experiment led the university to launch a semester-long “Conscious Digital Usage” elective. The case study demonstrates how structured digital discipline, rather than outright restriction, can positively influence mental and emotional health.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that social media, while indispensable for communication and learning, significantly affects university students’ behavioral health in the post-pandemic world. The findings reveal that high screen time is associated with anxiety, sleep disturbances, low academic focus, and social comparison-induced stress. However, moderate and mindful use can foster emotional support, improve communication, and reduce isolation. Therefore, the goal should not be digital abstinence but the promotion of digital literacy, emotional awareness, and screen-time regulation. Universities should implement orientation programs that include training on healthy digital behavior, introduce courses on cyber-psychology, and provide counseling for students facing digital fatigue. As the lines between virtual and real-life continue to blur, the need for psychological balance in the digital age becomes even more urgent. Future research should explore neurobiological impacts of prolonged digital exposure and evaluate the long-term success of campus-led interventions.

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