DOI: 10.71317/jgst.2.11.2026.980
Journal of Global Social Transformation
Journal homepage: https://rjsaonline.org/index.php/JGST

# Social Media Use and Students' Mental Health at The Graduation Level: Evidence From a Women's College in Faisalabad, Pakistan

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**ARTICLE INFO**

**Submission:**
October 09, 2026
**Revised:**
October 23, 2026
**Accepted:**
October 31, 2026
**Available Online:**
November 07, 2026

**Keywords:**
social media; mental health; undergraduate students; FOMO; sleep disturbance; cyberbullying; digital well-being

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**ABSTRACT**

Social media has become embedded in the everyday lives of undergraduate students, offering opportunities for communication, peer connection, creative expression, and access to information while also exposing users to social comparison, cyberbullying, fear of missing out (FOMO), and disrupted sleep. This study examined students' perceptions of the relationship between social media use and mental health at the graduation level in a women's college in Faisalabad, Pakistan. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was used. The research report identifies 41 valid respondents in the demographic and item-frequency tables; participants were selected through convenience sampling and completed a structured questionnaire with five-point Likert response options. Data were summarized through frequencies and percentages. The findings show that 70.8% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that social media connects them with supportive peers, while 73.2% reported that online groups support their mental well-being. At the same time, 56.1% reported stress or anxiety associated with social media interactions, 56.1% indicated that FOMO affects their mental health, and 78.0% agreed or strongly agreed that social media pressure affects their sleep. A majority also reported negative effects associated with cyberbullying, mood, and social comparison. Positive uses were also evident: 53.7% agreed or strongly agreed that they could find mental-health resources through social media. The findings suggest a dual pattern rather than a uniformly harmful or beneficial influence. Because the study is based on a small convenience sample and descriptive self-report data, results should be interpreted as local perceptions and not as evidence of causal effects or population-wide prevalence. The article recommends digital-wellness education, accessible student counselling, online-safety guidance, and further research using larger samples and validated measures.

## Introduction

Social media platforms have become routine spaces for communication, information sharing, entertainment, and self-expression. Applications such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube allow students to maintain relationships, participate in online groups, access educational content, and share personal experiences. These affordances can support learning and social connection, but the same platforms may also encourage prolonged screen engagement, frequent comparison with idealized online images, exposure to harmful interactions, and interruptions to sleep and study routines.

Mental health is an important dimension of students' personal and academic lives. Emotional well-being can influence concentration, motivation, decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to cope with academic demands. Students at the graduation level may experience examination pressure, career uncertainty, family expectations, and changing social

relationships. Social media use may interact with these pressures in different ways. Supportive online networks may reduce feelings of isolation, whereas negative feedback, cyberbullying, FOMO, and pressure to maintain an idealized online identity may contribute to emotional strain.

The literature reviewed in the underlying research report presents social media as a phenomenon with both potential benefits and risks. Social comparison theory explains how individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others, while the uses and gratifications perspective emphasizes that users select media to meet informational, social, emotional, and entertainment needs (Festinger, 1954; Katz et al., 1974). Research has also discussed associations between social media engagement, sleep disturbance, depressive symptoms, and psychological well-being (Ivie et al., 2020; Kross et al., 2021; Levenson et al., 2017). These associations do not mean that social media alone causes mental-health difficulties; patterns of use, individual circumstances, and offline support may all matter.

In Pakistan, the growing use of smartphones and social networking platforms makes it important to understand how students themselves perceive the benefits and challenges of online engagement. Local evidence can help colleges design realistic digital-literacy and student-support initiatives. The present study therefore focuses on graduation-level students at Government Graduate College for Women, 122/JB, Sargodha Road, Faisalabad.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of the study was to examine students' perceptions of how social media use relates to their mental health at the graduation level. It was guided by the following questions:

1. How do students perceive the positive and negative effects of social media on their mental well-being?
2. To what extent do students report experiences related to social comparison, FOMO, stress or anxiety, cyberbullying, mood, and sleep in connection with social media?
3. How do students use social media for peer support, mental-health information, emotional expression, and stress management?

## Literature Review and Theoretical Orientation

Social media refers to interactive digital platforms through which users create profiles, share content, communicate, and participate in networked communities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For students, these platforms may provide access to peer groups, academic information, and mental-health awareness resources. Online communication can extend support beyond the classroom and help students maintain contact with friends and family. Peer-to-peer support and online mental-health communities have consequently been discussed as possible complements to conventional support systems (Naslund et al., 2016).

However, social media environments can also expose students to upward social comparison. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory proposes that people evaluate aspects of themselves by comparing their abilities, opinions, or circumstances with those of others. On image-centred platforms, carefully selected photographs and lifestyle posts may create unrealistic standards. Repeated comparison may affect self-esteem and self-worth, particularly when users interpret curated online content as an accurate representation of other people's everyday lives.

The uses and gratifications approach emphasizes that media users are active participants who choose media to satisfy needs such as information seeking, entertainment, social connection, personal identity, and tension reduction (Katz et al., 1974). This perspective is relevant because the same student may use social media to obtain emotional support at one time and experience anxiety or distraction at another. The impact therefore depends not only on time spent online but also on the purpose, content, context, and quality of engagement.

Prior research has reported associations between social media use and mental-health indicators. For example, reviews have discussed links with depressive symptoms and psychological well-being (Ivie et al., 2020; Kross et al., 2021). Studies have also examined the relationship between social media use before bedtime and sleep disturbance (Levenson et al., 2017). Cyberbullying and negative online interactions are additional concerns because they can extend peer conflict into spaces that students access throughout the day. At the same time, access to supportive peers and reliable mental-health information may be beneficial. This mixed evidence supports examining both positive and negative experiences rather than assuming that all social media use has the same outcome.

## Methodology

### Research Design and Setting

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from graduation-level students at Government Graduate College for Women, 122/JB, Sargodha Road, Faisalabad, Pakistan. A cross-sectional survey provides a snapshot of participants' reported experiences at one point in time; it does not establish temporal order or causation.

### Population and Sample

The target population was graduation-level students enrolled at the college. Convenience sampling was used. The demographic tables and the item-frequency tables in the supplied research report consistently show 41 respondents, and this article therefore reports N = 41 for the analyzed results. The source report elsewhere refers to a sample of 50. This discrepancy must be checked against the original response file before final submission; the article does not treat the unverified figure of 50 as the analyzed sample.

### Instrument and Data Collection

Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire using five response categories: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The questionnaire covered demographic information and statements concerning peer support, online groups, loneliness, social comparison, pressure to present an ideal image, self-worth, stress or anxiety, FOMO, sleep, cyberbullying, mood, access to mental-health resources, creative emotional expression, and stress management. The research report describes the questionnaire as adapted from existing literature. It also mentions a pilot test and a Cronbach's alpha value of .79; however, the report does not provide the pilot dataset or item-level reliability output, so this reliability estimate should be independently verified before publication.

### Data Analysis

The available results were analyzed descriptively using frequencies and percentages. No correlation coefficients, group-comparison statistics, confidence intervals, or inferential test outputs were supplied in the results tables. Accordingly, this article reports only the descriptive statistics available in the source report and does not claim statistical significance or causal effects.

### Ethical Considerations

The source report states that participation was voluntary, confidentiality was assured, and responses were used for research purposes. It also states that departmental permission and ethical approval were obtained. The approving committee, approval reference, and date were not included in the supplied report and should be added if the journal requires formal ethics documentation.

## Results

The results are based on 41 respondents. Percentages are reproduced from the frequency tables in the research report. For clarity, the table below combines the response categories into the proportion who agreed or strongly agreed (positive endorsement of the item), while retaining the neutral and disagreement percentages. The wording of each item is preserved in substance.

| Characteristic | Category | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 20 years | 4 | 9.8 |
| | 21 years | 8 | 19.5 |
| | 22 years | 15 | 36.6 |
| | 23 years | 10 | 24.4 |
| | 24 years | 2 | 4.9 |
| | 25 years | 2 | 4.9 |
| Programme | BS Education | 28 | 68.3 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | BS English | 3 | 7.3 |
| | BS Islamiat | 3 | 7.3 |
| | BS Physical Education | 1 | 2.4 |
| | BS Psychology | 2 | 4.9 |
| | BS Urdu | 4 | 9.8 |
| Year of study | Last year | 32 | 78.0 |
| | Third year | 9 | 22.0 |
| Semester | 5th | 3 | 7.3 |
| | 6th | 6 | 14.6 |
| | 8th | 32 | 78.0 |

**Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N = 41).**

Most respondents were 22 years old (36.6%), followed by 23 years (24.4%) and 21 years (19.5%). More than two-thirds were enrolled in BS Education (68.3%). Most participants were in their last year of study (78.0%) and in the eighth semester (78.0%).

**Perceived Social Support and Connection**

| Questionnaire item | Agree + strongly agree n (%) | Neutral n (%) | Disagree + strongly disagree n (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social media connects me with supportive peers. | 29 (70.8) | 8 (19.5) | 4 (9.8) |
| Online groups support my mental well-being. | 30 (73.2) | 7 (17.1) | 4 (9.8) |
| Social media reduces my loneliness. | 27 (65.9) | 7 (17.1) | 7 (17.1) |
| I find mental-health resources on social media. | 22 (53.7) | 10 (24.4) | 9 (22.0) |
| Social media helps me express emotions creatively. | 22 (53.7) | 10 (24.4) | 9 (22.0) |
| I use social media to manage stress. | 23 (56.1) | 11 (26.8) | 7 (17.1) |

**Table 2. Positive or supportive uses of social media.**

The results indicate that students recognized supportive functions of social media. Nearly three-quarters (73.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that online groups support their mental well-being, and 70.8% reported that social media connects them with supportive peers. Around two-thirds (65.9%) perceived that social media reduces loneliness. More than half reported finding mental-health resources (53.7%), expressing emotions creatively (53.7%), and using social media to manage stress (56.1%). These results suggest that students also use online platforms as sources of connection and coping, although the questionnaire did not assess the quality or accuracy of the resources accessed.

**Social Comparison, Stress, FOMO, and Emotional Experiences**

| Questionnaire item | Agree + strongly agree n (%) | Neutral n (%) | Disagree + strongly disagree n (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social media comparisons lower my self-esteem. | 22 (53.7) | 12 (29.3) | 7 (17.1) |
| I feel pressure to present a perfect image online. | 18 (43.9) | 15 (36.6) | 8 (19.5) |
| Social media use impacts my self-worth. | 26 (63.4) | 11 (26.8) | 4 (9.8) |
| I experience stress/anxiety from social media interactions. | 23 (56.1) | 12 (29.3) | 6 (14.7) |
| FOMO on social media affects my mental health. | 23 (56.1) | 14 (34.1) | 4 (9.8) |
| Cyberbullying on social media impacts me negatively. | 25 (61.0) | 7 (17.1) | 9 (22.0) |
| Excessive social media use worsens my mood. | 27 (65.8) | 9 (22.0) | 5 (12.2) |
| Social media exposure triggers negative emotions. | 25 (60.9) | 11 (26.8) | 5 (12.2) |

**Table 3. Self-evaluation and reported negative experiences.**

More than half of the respondents endorsed several negative experiences. A total of 63.4% agreed or strongly agreed that social media use impacts their self-worth, while 53.7% reported that social media comparisons lower their self-esteem. Stress or anxiety arising from social media interactions and the mental-health impact of FOMO were each endorsed by 56.1%. In addition, 61.0% reported a negative impact from cyberbullying, 65.8% indicated that excessive use worsens their mood, and 60.9% reported that social media exposure triggers negative emotions. Responses about pressure to present a perfect image were more divided: 43.9% agreed or strongly agreed, while 36.6% were neutral.

**Sleep-Related Experience**

| Questionnaire item | Agree + strongly agree n (%) | Neutral n (%) | Disagree + strongly disagree n (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social media pressure affects my sleep. | 32 (78.0) | 6 (14.6) | 3 (7.3) |

**Table 4. Reported sleep-related experience.**

Sleep was the most frequently endorsed negative experience in the item set: 78.0% agreed or strongly agreed that social media pressure affects their sleep. This is a self-reported perception and does not represent a clinical assessment of sleep quality or a measured diagnosis of sleep disturbance.

## Discussion

The findings portray social media as a mixed environment for the students surveyed. On the positive side, respondents commonly identified peer connection and online groups as sources of support. This is consistent with the view that social networking can facilitate social connection and peer-to-peer support (Naslund et al., 2016). More than half also reported finding mental-health resources online and using social media for creative emotional expression or stress management. These results reinforce the importance of distinguishing purposeful, supportive engagement from passive or distressing experiences.

At the same time, a substantial proportion of respondents associated social media with reduced self-esteem, changes in self-worth, stress or anxiety, FOMO, cyberbullying, negative emotions, and worsened mood. The pattern is compatible with social comparison theory: exposure to curated portrayals of other people's lives may invite unfavorable self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954). It is also consistent with research syntheses that have identified associations between social media use and aspects of psychological well-being, while emphasizing that effects vary by context and type of use (Ivie et al., 2020; Kross et al., 2021).

The strongest descriptive result concerned sleep: 78.0% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that social media pressure affects their sleep. This finding is relevant to previous work examining social media use before bedtime and sleep disturbance (Levenson et al., 2017). However, the present study did not measure bedtime use, sleep duration, or validated sleep-quality scores. The result should therefore be interpreted as students' perceptions rather than proof that social media caused a sleep disorder.

The positive and negative findings should not be treated as contradictory. A student may benefit from a supportive class group while also experiencing anxiety from comparison or online conflict. The uses and gratifications perspective helps explain this variation because students engage with platforms for different purposes, and the same platform may serve several needs (Katz et al., 1974). Colleges should therefore promote mindful and purposeful use rather than assuming that all social media engagement is harmful.

The study contributes a small, institution-specific snapshot from a women's college in Faisalabad. Its value lies in documenting students' reported experiences and identifying areas for institutional discussion. It does not establish prevalence among all students in Faisalabad or Pakistan, nor does it establish causal relationships.

## Conclusion

The study found that graduation-level respondents reported both supportive and adverse experiences associated with social media. Peer connection, online group support, access to mental-health resources, creative expression, and stress management were among the perceived benefits. Reported concerns included social comparison, changes in self-worth, stress or anxiety, FOMO, cyberbullying, negative emotions, mood changes, and particularly sleep-related pressure. The findings support a balanced approach that strengthens students' digital literacy and online safety while preserving the potential benefits of online connection. Given the small convenience sample and descriptive design, conclusions are limited to the perceptions of the respondents who participated.

## Recommendations

1. Colleges should provide practical digital-wellness sessions covering screen-time awareness, notification management, privacy, and healthy online boundaries.
2. Student guidance and counselling services should include confidential support for students affected by cyberbullying, online harassment, anxiety, or sleep-related concerns.
3. Students should be encouraged to avoid prolonged social media use immediately before sleep and to establish regular offline routines.
4. Teachers and parents should guide students toward critical evaluation of online content, especially idealized images, unverified mental-health advice, and harmful comparisons.
5. Institutions should promote positive online communities that support academic collaboration, peer connection, and access to credible mental-health information.

Future studies should use larger and more representative samples, validated mental-health and social-media-use scales, and appropriate inferential analyses. Longitudinal or mixed-methods designs could help clarify how patterns of use relate to well-being over time.

## Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. First, the sample was selected through convenience sampling from one college, limiting generalizability. Second, the results are based on self-reported questionnaire responses and may be affected by recall or social-desirability bias. Third, the design was cross-sectional and descriptive; it cannot establish causal effects or determine whether social media use preceded reported mental-health experiences. Fourth, the supplied report contains an inconsistency between the stated sample of 50 in some methodological and summary passages and the 41 respondents shown in the demographic and item tables. This article uses N = 41 because that is the denominator consistently reported in the analyzed tables; the authors should verify this against the original dataset before submission. Finally, the report does not provide the full reliability output or inferential statistical results, so these have not been added.

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