Scrolling and Belonging: Behavioural Patterns of Social Media Use and Their Impact on Youth Subjective Well-Being

Xiyan Cao*

University Utara Malaysia 06010 UUM Sintok, Kedah Darul Aman, Malaysia
Hengyang Normal University, 16, henghua road, linghu, zhuhui district, hengyang city, hunan province, China, 421002

Norsiah Abdul Hamid, Rohana Mijan

University Utara Malaysia 06010 UUM Sintok, Kedah Darul Aman, Malaysia

This essay examines the ways in which social media use affects subjective well-being among younger individuals, with particular emphasis on the culture of passive scrolling and its implications for feelings of social connectedness. Although existing literature addresses the psychological consequences of social media engagement, most research emphasises overall usage patterns rather than specific behaviours such as non-interactive browsing. This paper seeks to address that gap by exploring how varying scrolling practices influence perceived belonging and general well-being in youth populations. A quantitative approach was adopted, using an online self-administered questionnaire targeted specifically at younger respondents. Measures related to the frequency and nature of social media engagement, perceived social support, and personal well-being were assessed through Likert-scale items. The dataset was processed using SPSS software, and statistical correlation, regression, and mediation analyses were applied to identify both direct and indirect associations between media use patterns and well-being indicators. Findings show that habitual passive scrolling correlates with diminished feelings of belonging, which in turn correspond with lower reported well-being. The study highlights the importance of encouraging more active and engaging forms of online interaction to support healthier social outcomes among youth. It concludes that meaningful social

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Xiyan Cao, University Utara Malaysia 06010 UUM Sintok, Kedah Darul Aman, Malaysia, Hengyang Normal University, 16, henghua road, linghu, zhuhui district, hengyang city, hunan province, China, 421002
Email: caoxiyan578@gmail.com

media engagement can contribute positively to subjective well-being by fostering online social capital, emotional stability, self-worth, and stronger senses of affiliation. Conversely, passive browsing and social comparison practices may lead to negative mental health outcomes, including heightened loneliness, depressive symptoms, and anxiety.

Introduction

Importance of the Study

In contemporary society, where digital technologies are increasingly embedded in daily life, the use of social networking platforms has become routine, particularly among university students. Through these platforms, students are able to collaborate, exchange experiences, and maintain social contact with peers. Consequently, the influence of social media on their overall well-being, especially in relation to subjective well-being and the formation of social capital, has become an issue of notable relevance (Venugeetha et al., 2022). The significance of this research lies in its broader perspective on how young individuals engage with social media and the potential implications of such engagement. While psychological outcomes of social media use have been widely examined, much of the existing literature concentrates on general usage patterns rather than on the impacts of specific behaviours, such as non-interactive or passive browsing. This study addresses that limitation by exploring how different scrolling practices shape feelings of social connectedness and levels of well-being among young people.

Background of the Study

Social networking platforms have transformed how individuals communicate and form relationships, especially among university students who use these platforms for social interactions, academic communication, and community involvement (Siddiqui and Singh, 2016). Previous research has explored their influence on mental health, loneliness, and social integration, demonstrating both beneficial and adverse outcomes (Lazo & Ramos, 2022). Some findings suggest that social media enhances social capital, while other studies associate it with increased feelings of isolation and inadequacy (Cheng et al., 2023). However, there remains a lack of detailed examination of how these digital environments shape the emotional and psychological well-being of university students. In particular, the roles of bonding and bridging forms of online social capital have not been thoroughly investigated as potential mediating factors within this relationship. Due to the limited scope of

current scholarship, further research is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between digital engagement, the development of social capital, and students' mental health outcomes.

Problem Statement

Although the use of social media among university students is well established, its psychological and social consequences are still not fully understood. It remains uncertain whether online interactions foster meaningful experiences that contribute positively to well-being, or whether they instead intensify feelings of loneliness and heighten social disconnection. This gap in the literature indicates the need for further inquiry into how digital engagement influences students' mental health and their broader social experiences.

Research Objectives

This research investigates how social media engagement influences university students. The study specifically aims to:
1. Examine the association between social media usage and subjective well-being among university students.
2. Assess whether social media involvement is linked to the development of online social capital, including both bonding and bridging forms.
3. Determine the mediating role of online social capital in the relationship between social media use and subjective well-being.

Research Questions

1. How does university students' use of social media affect their subjective well-being?
2. Is there an association between social media use and online social capital (bridging and bonding)?
3. Does online social capital mediate the association between social media use and subjective well-being?

Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (H_0)

1. Researchers found no link between social media use and the subjective well-being of university students.
2. Social media use shows a weak connection with building online social capital.
3. Online social capital does not mediate the effect of social media use on subjective well-being.

Alternative Hypotheses

1. H1: There is a notable association between social media use and the subjective well-being of college students.
2. H2: Social media use has a strong correlation with online social capital (bridging and bonding).
3. H3: Online social capital plays a mediating role in the relationship between social media use and subjective well-being.

Significance of the Study

This research holds importance at both academic and practical levels. From an academic standpoint, it contributes to the ongoing examination of the psychological and social consequences of social media use among university students. Rather than simply measuring online social capital as a direct factor influencing well-being, the study takes a broader analytical approach by considering online social capital as a mediating element in this relationship. Practically, the findings may support university administrators, counsellors, and even social media platform designers in understanding how patterns of social media engagement shape students' health and social well-being. This could encourage the development of supportive measures and protective strategies that promote positive online interactions while helping reduce the negative effects linked to excessive or passive social media use.

Literature Review

Positive Aspects of Digital Media for Youth

The effects of social media on young people have been widely examined, with evidence showing both advantageous and detrimental outcomes. On the positive side, social networking platforms can provide spaces for self-expression, emotional support, and ongoing social connection, all of which may contribute positively to the well-being of young individuals. Research suggests that adolescents often turn to social media as part of forming and validating their identities during key developmental stages (Thomas et al., 2017). Opportunities to engage with peers who share similar interests can strengthen feelings of belonging, which has been associated with higher self-worth and greater emotional balance (Jetten et al., 2015). In addition, social media platforms offer access to mental health support networks and informational resources that may enhance coping abilities when experiencing distress (Liu & Xiao, 2024). These platforms have also encouraged youth participation in social advocacy and constructive collective initiatives, helping foster a sense of meaning and empowerment.

Digital spaces therefore offer numerous opportunities for learning, personal development, and exposure to diverse perspectives. For instance, the online environment provides young individuals with educational materials and skill-building tools that may support academic progress and future career growth. Furthermore, virtual communities enable users to connect with others who share similar values or experiences, providing emotional affirmation and a sense of shared identity. Prior studies indicate that such interactions can strengthen social relationships and enhance feelings of belonging, both of which are central to psychological development and the formation of self-confidence in young people.

Negative Psychological Effects of Excessive Social Media Use

However, alongside these positive aspects, there are also recognised negative implications associated with social media use among young people. Persistent or primarily passive engagement, such as continuously scrolling through feeds, has been linked to a range of psychological difficulties, including heightened loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Brand et al., 2024). These negative outcomes are often rooted in processes of social comparison, where individuals evaluate their own self-worth against the seemingly idealised representations of others' lives displayed online. Such comparisons can lead to feelings of inferiority and dissatisfaction, particularly when young users encounter images and narratives that are heavily curated or constructed (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2022). The constant exposure to perfected digital portrayals can create standards that are unrealistic and unattainable, intensifying emotional distress and contributing to worsening mental health conditions (Roberts & David, 2023). These patterns suggest that although social media can offer genuine opportunities for connection and growth, its influence may become detrimental when usage becomes excessive or revolves around passive consumption rather than meaningful interaction. In this way, the platform's benefits can coexist with substantial risks, particularly for youth who spend prolonged periods online.

The Role of Belonging in Social Media Use

A further factor shaping young people's well-being is their sense of belonging. Although social media platforms are designed to facilitate connection, the emotional outcomes depend largely on the quality of those interactions. Some young users experience a strengthened sense of belonging when they participate in online communities that reflect their identities or interests (Flanagan, 2015). This supportive connection can reduce feelings of isolation and contribute to more positive self-regard.

However, other studies indicate that social media can also contribute to feelings of exclusion, particularly when individuals perceive themselves as outsiders in online social environments (Schneider et al., 2017). These contrasting outcomes illustrate the complexity of social media's influence on subjective well-being, where belonging can either reinforce or undermine emotional health depending on the nature of engagement (Virós-Martín et al., 2024). Thus, the sense of belonging plays a central role in young people's emotional stability, especially in digital interactions. While online platforms can provide inclusive spaces where individuals meet others with shared experiences, fostering confidence and social assurance, they may, for some, produce the opposite effect. When users feel overlooked or disconnected within online networks, interactions may evoke isolation rather than support. Consequently, the emotional impact of social media use is closely tied to the authenticity and depth of the relationships formed within these spaces.

Impact of Scrolling Behaviour on Youth Well-Being

In contrast to broader discussions of social media use, far less attention has been given to the act of scrolling itself, particularly the prolonged, largely passive consumption of content, despite its potential significance for the mental well-being of young people. Scrolling involves viewing content without contributing or interacting in any meaningful way (Jovicic, 2020). This form of passive use has been associated with feelings of dissatisfaction, boredom, and a diminished sense of purpose (Karsay et al., 2023). Research suggests that such non-interactive engagement tends to produce negative well-being outcomes because it encourages continuous and unreflective intake of material rather than thoughtful participation (Ho & Ito, 2019). Additionally, the immediate and repeated gratification offered by social media platforms, driven by reward-centred mechanisms, may reinforce the urge to scroll persistently, contributing to addictive patterns and emotional distress (Verduyn et al., 2017). As a result, habitual and unregulated scrolling has the potential to undermine emotional regulation and overall psychological health.

Gaps in Existing Research and Need for Focused Exploration

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the need to better understand how social media use relates to well-being among young people. While existing research has established general links between digital engagement and mental health outcomes, it often neglects the specific behaviours that occur within these platforms, such as scrolling. There is a growing call for investigations that look more closely at patterns of use which may shape or mediate these relationships (Murari et al.,

2024). Although earlier studies have highlighted negative psychological effects associated with excessive screen exposure and social comparison, fewer have examined how the habit of persistent scrolling may directly influence the development of self-esteem and emotional resilience (Sarfraz et al., 2025). This gap in the literature provides an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the psychological mechanisms that operate in youth digital engagement. By examining behaviours such as scrolling, future research may offer a more comprehensive account of how social media use affects emotional well-being and may also inform strategies for fostering healthier online practices among young people.

Research Methodology

Research Method: Quantitative Approach

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationships among social media use, online social capital, and subjective well-being in university students. A quantitative approach was deemed appropriate because it allows for the systematic measurement of variables and the assessment of potential mediating effects in a structured and interpretable manner. According to Boersma et al. (2016), quantitative research is effective for determining the strength of associations between multiple variables and for testing hypotheses through statistical analysis. This methodology was selected to enable the statistical evaluation of data collected from a substantial sample of participants, thereby facilitating an accurate investigation of the links between social media engagement, the development of social capital, and overall well-being.

Research Design: Quantitative Data Collection

Targeted Population

The study focused on university students enrolled across multiple institutions. Participants were required to be active users of social media to ensure that their experiences aligned with the aims of the research. The sample included individuals with varied demographic backgrounds, including differences in gender, age, and ethnic identity, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how social media use may affect different groups of students. In total, 200 respondents took part, of whom 47 per cent (94 individuals) identified as female and 52 per cent (106 individuals) identified as male.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected using an online questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The survey link was shared via university communication channels, social media platforms, and relevant academic discussion groups. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study's purpose before giving their consent. Participants were free to complete the questionnaire at their own pace, as no time restrictions were imposed. All submitted responses were automatically stored in a secure database for subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis

SPSS software was employed to analyse the data collected for the study. Initially, descriptive statistics were used to summarise participant characteristics and their responses. Following this, correlation and regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between social media use, online social capital, and subjective well-being. The mediating effect of online social capital was assessed using a mediation model based on PROCESS Macro Model 5 (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022). This approach enabled the study to determine whether online social capital served as an intermediary factor in the relationship between social media engagement and subjective well-being, thereby offering insight into indirect effects arising from social media use.

Ethical Consideration

The study was carried out in accordance with established ethical guidelines to ensure the protection and privacy of all participants. The purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of participation were clearly explained to each individual before involvement. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. No identifying personal information was collected, and all data were stored securely in password-protected files. The research followed the university's ethical protocols, ensuring that participants were treated with respect and that the study was conducted responsibly.

Data Analysis

Demographics

The sample's demographic profile was adequately balanced, with women constituting 47 percent of the 200 respondents (94 individuals) and men accounting for 52 percent (106 individuals), indicating a near-equitable gender distribution. The age variable, assessed on a four-point scale, produced a mean of 1.93 and a standard deviation of 1.00, suggesting that

a considerable proportion of participants fell into the younger age brackets. Ethnic background, measured on a two-point scale, yielded an overall mean score of 1.48 with a standard deviation of 0.501, implying that the group exhibited a largely uniform ethnic composition. Engagement with social media, also measured on a scale ranging from 1 to 4, resulted in an average score of 2.19 and a standard deviation of 1.035, indicating that participants generally demonstrated moderate usage of social media platforms rather than extensive or comprehensive utilisation across all available tools. Table 1 is a description of the study variables. The sample consists of 200 respondents, and the minimum and maximum values are reported for each of the following variables: gender, age, ethnicity, and preferred social media platforms. Mean scores and standard deviations depict the general distribution and variability within the set of data.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation
Gender	200	1	2	1.5	.501
Age	200	1	4	1.93	1.000
Ethnicity	199	1	2	1.48	.501
Social Media Platform	199	1	4	2.19	1.035
Valid N (listwise)	198				

Gender

   The descriptive statistics in table 1 indicate that the dataset includes variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, and the use of social media platforms. The gender variable shows a mean value of 1.50 with a standard deviation of 0.501, indicating an even distribution between the two gender categories. Age, measured on a four-point scale, has a mean of 1.93 and a standard deviation of 1.000, suggesting that the sample is concentrated more heavily within the younger age range. Ethnicity reveals a mean of 1.48 and a variance of 0.501, indicating a predominantly uniform ethnic composition among participants. Social media usage records a mean of 2.19 and a relatively higher standard deviation of 1.035, implying varied levels of engagement across different platforms. Following listwise deletion, the effective sample size for the analysis is 198.*r*
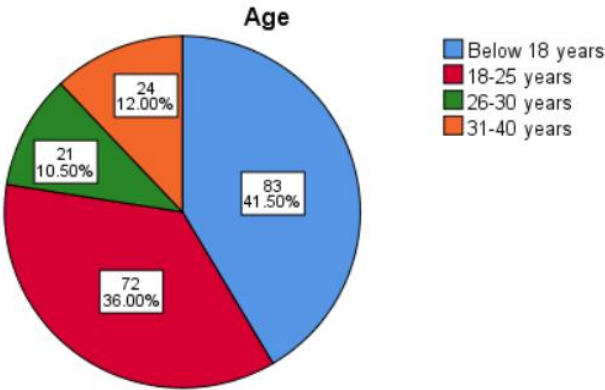
Figure 1: shows the distribution of age of the respondents. The majority of the participants are younger than 18 (41.5) and younger than 18-25 (36), and there are minor proportions of participants between the age groups of 2630 and 3140.
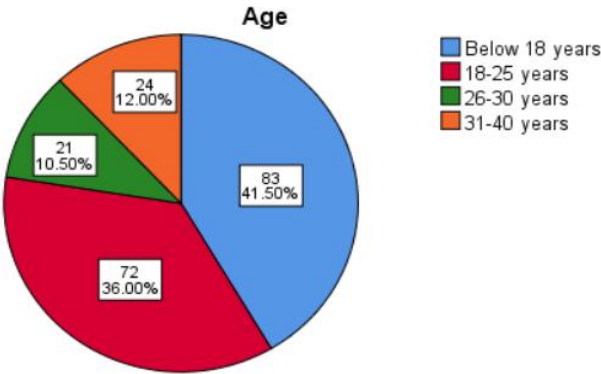

Figure 2: Age groups of the respondents once again present the same proportions, with a higher number of below-18 age category (41.5%), then 18-25 (36%), and then lower age groups (26-30 and 31-40 worlds).
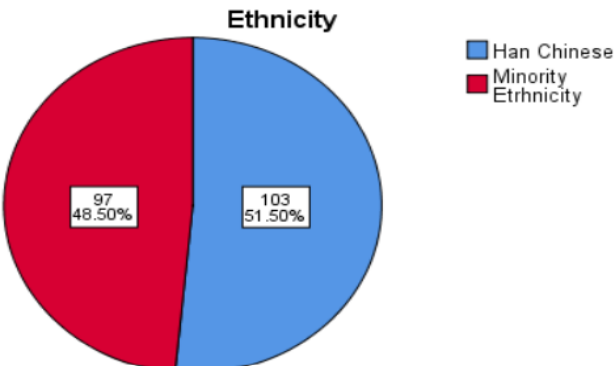
Figure 3: shows the distribution of ethnicity in which nearly fifty percent of people are Han Chinese and the rest 48.5 percent is minority ethnicities.
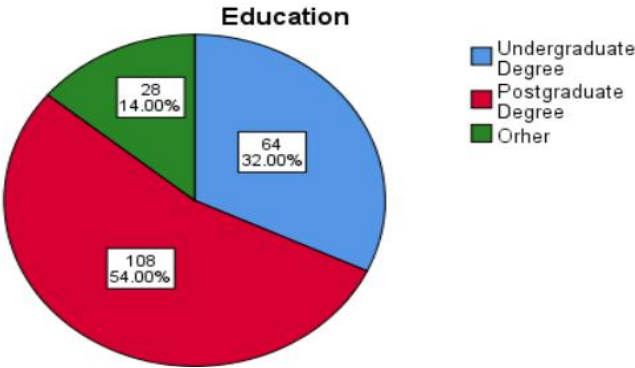

Figure 4: The level of education of the respondents is depicted in figure 4, 54% of the respondents have a post graduate degree, 32% have an undergraduate degree and 14% of the respondents are in other educational categories.

The ANOVA results as shown in figure 4 were used to determine whether each factor exerted a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable. Gender and ethnicity both yielded non-significant outcomes, with p-values of .995 and .193 respectively, indicating that neither variable meaningfully influences the dependent measure. A similar pattern is observed for education, which also demonstrated no notable impact (p = .962). In contrast, age showed a statistically significant association (p = .028), suggesting that age contributes to variation in the dependent variable. Additionally, use of social media platforms, subjective well-being among young individuals, and online social capital all produced p-values of .000, indicating strong and meaningful relationships with the dependent variable. Overall, the results suggest that age, social media

platform usage, well-being, and online social capital act as influential predictors, whereas gender, ethnicity, and education do not play a significant role in shaping the outcome under study.

The results of ANOVA in Table 2 indicate that there is a significant difference in the use of social media platforms, youth subjective well-being, and online social capital, but no significant difference was found in gender, age, ethnicity, and education.

Table 2:

ANOVA Test

Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Gender	Between Groups	2.438	23	.106	.392	.995
	Within Groups	46.810	173	.271		
	Total	49.249	196			
Age	Between Groups	36.700	23	1.596	1.713	.028
	Within Groups	161.188	173	.932		
	Total	197.888	196			
Ethnicity	Between Groups	7.120	23	.310	.191	.999
	Within Groups	421.219	173	2.434		
	Total	428.339	196			
Education	Between Groups	6.559	23	.285	.531	.962
	Within Groups	92.773	173	.536		
	Total	99.332	196			
Social Media Platform	Between Groups	53.328	23	2.320	2.583	.000
	Within Groups	155.143	172	.896		
	Total	208.471	195			
Youth Subjective Well-Being	Between Groups	112.573	23	4.894	3.726	.000
	Within Groups	226.127	173	1.308		
	Total	338.700	196			
Online Social Capital	Between Groups	21.740	23	.945	2.841	.000
	Within Groups	57.967	169	.333		
	Total	77.967	192			

The results of the one-sample t-test in table 2 indicate that all assessed variables demonstrate statistically significant differences, with each showing a Sig. (2-tailed) value of .000, meaning they are robustly significant at the $p < 0.001$ threshold. Gender records a high t-value of 42.320 with a mean difference of 1.500, reflecting a distinct distribution pattern within the sample. Similarly, age is significant, with a t-value of 27.293 and a mean difference of 1.930. Ethnicity also shows strong significance (t = 41.916; mean difference = 1.485), demonstrating notable divergence from the test reference point. Education and social media usage both exhibit high levels of significance, evidenced by t-values of 39.263 and 29.763 respectively. The variables representing social media use and online social capital show particularly elevated t-values of 55.029

and 56.987, indicating their substantial presence and relevance in the dataset. The measure of subjective well-being among youth also reveals strong significance, with a t-value of 32.273 and a considerable mean difference of 3.00603. Collectively, these findings confirm that all variables differ markedly from the test value of zero, underscoring the existence of meaningful relationships and reinforcing the credibility of the derived conclusions.

Table 3 indicates that all the variables are significantly dissimilar with high positive mean differences among gender, age, ethnicity, education, use of social media, online social capital, and youth subjective well-being.

Table 3

Results of One-Sample T-Test

Gender	42.320	199	.000	1.500	1.43	1.57
Age	27.293	199	.000	1.930	1.79	2.07
Ethnicity	41.916	198	.000	1.480	1.43	1.55
Education	31.243	198	.000	1.780	1.73	1.91
Social Media Platform	29.763	199	.000	2.180	2.04	2.32
Social Media Use	28.015	199	.000	2.63515	2.54047	2.72986
Online Social Capital	56.987	195	.000	2.66051	2.59105	2.68965
Youth Subjective Well-Being	32.273	198	.000	3.00603	2.8224	3.1897

The correlation matrix in table 3 illustrates the relationships among social media use, subjective well-being among youth, and online social capital. Pearson correlation coefficients and their corresponding significance values were computed. The results show that subjective well-being among youth is moderately and significantly associated with social media use ($r = 0.486$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that higher levels of social media engagement correspond to increased levels of perceived well-being in young individuals. Additionally, social media use is positively correlated with online social capital ($r = 0.391$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that greater involvement in social media is linked to enhanced online social connectivity and resource exchange. The strongest relationship identified is between subjective well-being and online social capital ($r = 0.563$, $p = 0.000$). This implies that as young individuals perceive higher well-being, their level of online social capital tends to increase correspondingly. All correlation coefficients are statistically significant at the 0.01 level, confirming the robustness of these associations. Collectively, these findings indicate a meaningful and interconnected relationship among social media usage, youth subjective well-being, and online social capital.

Table 4 demonstrates that there are positive significant associations between social media use and youth subjective well-being and online social capital whereby the more individuals use social media, the more

their well-being and the stronger their online social ties.

Table 4:

Correlation Test

Variables	Social Media Use	Youth Subjective Well-Being	Online Social Capital
Social Media Use	1	.486**	.391**
Sig. (2-tailed)	–	.000	.000
N	197	196	193
Youth Subjective Well-Being	.486**	1	.563**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	–	.000
N	196	199	195
Online Social Capital	.391**	.563**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	–
N	193	195	196

Table 5 presents the regression analysis examining the relationship between social media use and subjective well-being among youth. The Model Summary reports an R-squared value of 0.236, indicating that approximately 23.6 percent of the variation in youth well-being can be explained by levels of social media use. The adjusted R-squared value of 0.232 further suggests that the model is reasonably stable, though a considerable portion of the variance remains unexplained. The standard error of the estimate is 1.15460, indicating a moderate degree of accuracy in predicting well-being from social media usage.

Table 5

Regression Analysis

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.486[a]	.236	.232	1.15460

[a] Predictors: (Constant), Social Media Use

ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	79.872	1	79.872	59.914	.000[b]
Residual	258.624	194	1.333		
Total	338.495	195			

[b] Predictors: (Constant), Social Media Use
Dependent Variable: Youth Subjective Well-Being

Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.508	.334	—	1.523	.129
Social Media Use	.950	.123	.486	7.740	.000

Dependent Variable: Youth Subjective Well-Being

The ANOVA test confirms the statistical significance of the regression model. The F-statistic is 59.914 with a corresponding p-value of 0.000, which is well below the 0.05 threshold. This demonstrates that social media use significantly accounts for variation in youth subjective well-being. The regression sum of squares (79.872) compared with the residual sum of squares (258.624) reinforces the model's explanatory contribution. The Coefficients results shows a constant term of 0.508, although this value is not statistically significant (p = 0.129). In contrast, the coefficient associated with social media use is 0.950 (p = 0.000), indicating a strong positive relationship whereby increases in social media engagement correspond to higher levels of reported well-being. The standardised coefficient (Beta) of 0.486 reflects a moderate effect size, meaning that while social media use significantly influences youth well-being, it is not the sole determinant of it. Overall, the regression analysis demonstrates a clear and statistically meaningful positive association between social media use and subjective well-being among young people, while also acknowledging that additional factors contribute to their overall well-being.

Discussion

The literature review highlights the dual nature of social media, illustrating how it can simultaneously support and undermine the well-being of young people. On one side, platforms enable self-expression, emotional reinforcement, and a sense of belonging, which can strengthen confidence and emotional stability. These advantages are consistent with earlier research that positions social media as a developmental arena where identity formation and peer integration occur, particularly during the transition into university life. On the other side, the review also notes the detrimental impact of passive and non-interactive browsing behaviour, such as prolonged scrolling, which has been linked to increased loneliness, depressive symptoms, and anxiety. This reinforces established findings suggesting that the psychological outcomes of social media use are shaped less by frequency of engagement and more by the context and manner in which the platforms are used.

The empirical results demonstrating positive associations between social media use, subjective well-being, and online social capital suggest that digital interactions play a meaningful role in fostering a sense of belonging and affiliation. The regression analysis further indicates that a notable proportion of the variation in well-being is linked to social media engagement, emphasising the relevance of digital networks in emotional functioning. These observations align with existing research, which argues that social media can enhance social connectedness when it facilitates meaningful and supportive online relationships. However, the adjusted R-

squared value of 23.6 percent also implies that additional unmeasured factors, such as offline social ties or individual personality traits, contribute substantially to youth well-being. This underscores the necessity of examining a broader set of influences that shape emotional health.

The findings are consistent with literature asserting that the quality of online interactions is a stronger predictor of psychological outcomes than the quantity of usage. The mediating role of online social capital is particularly salient in understanding how digital environments can either promote or undermine well-being. When students develop supportive and constructive online communities, positive emotional outcomes are more likely. Conversely, limited or negative online interaction can precipitate social withdrawal and emotional distress. This suggests that fostering constructive digital communities is essential to strengthening well-being and mitigating potential harm. The study's reliance on self-report measures introduces potential limitations, such as social desirability bias and imprecise recollection of behaviour. Although standardised instruments enhance internal consistency, they may not fully capture actual usage patterns or their nuanced psychological effects. Longitudinal research would be valuable in detecting how these relationships evolve over time and in clarifying the causal pathways involved. Incorporating objective indicators of well-being, or behavioural analytics derived directly from social media activity, may further enrich understanding of how online engagement shapes mental health.

Conclusion

This study enhances understanding of the interplay between social media use, online social capital, and subjective well-being among university students. Findings indicate that social media engagement positively relates to well-being, with online social capital serving as a key mediator. Platforms enable communication, identity development, and supportive networks, fostering emotional stability and self-esteem, particularly when interactions form meaningful social ties that strengthen belonging. Conversely, passive browsing, especially involving social comparison or superficial interactions, can contribute to loneliness, depression, and anxiety, demonstrating that well-being depends on the quality, not just the quantity, of engagement. Regression analysis confirms that social media use and online social capital explain a significant portion of variation in well-being, although offline relationships, peer and family dynamics, and individual traits also influence emotional health. Overall, the results highlight the complex, context-dependent nature of social media's psychological impact and underscore the importance of promoting constructive engagement while mitigating potential risks.

Study Limitations

A primary limitation of this study is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or errors in participants' recollection. Additionally, the cross-sectional design precludes the ability to infer causal relationships between social media use and subjective well-being. The sample may also lack full representativeness, as it might not capture the diversity of youth across different regions, socio-economic backgrounds, or cultural contexts. Furthermore, the platforms analysed may not fully reflect the evolution of social media or its varied impacts on users over time, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings.

Future Directions

Future investigations could employ a longitudinal design to establish causal links between social media engagement and youth subjective well-being, considering varying levels of platform usage. Analysing the interplay between specific platforms, content types, and interaction patterns may yield further insights into behavioural trends. Expanding the sample to include individuals from diverse demographics would provide a broader understanding of the subtler effects of social media. Moreover, examining the implementation of social media literacy programmes could identify interventions aimed at enhancing young people's mental health. Finally, incorporating biological or neurological measures could offer a more holistic perspective on the mechanisms underlying these associations.

References

Boersma, K. S., Dee, L. E., Miller, S. J., Bogan, M. T., Lytle, D. A., & Gitelman, A. I. (2016). Linking multidimensional functional diversity to quantitative methods: A graphical hypothesis-evaluation framework. *Ecology*, *97*(3), 583-593. https://doi.org/10.1890/15-0688

Brand, C., Fochesatto, C. F., Gaya, A. R., Schuch, F. B., & López-Gil, J. F. (2024). Scrolling through adolescence: unveiling the relationship of the use of social networks and its addictive behavior with psychosocial health. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, *18*(1), 107. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-024-00805-0

Cheng, W., Nguyen, D. N., & Nguyen, P. N. T. (2023). The association between passive social network usage and depression/negative emotions with envy as a mediator. *Scientific reports*, *13*(1), 10097. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-37185-y

Clement, L. M., & Bradley-Garcia, M. (2022). A step-by-step tutorial for performing a moderated mediation analysis using PROCESS. *The Quantitative Methods for Psychology*, *18*(3), 258-271. https://doi.org/10.20982/tqmp.18.3.p258

Fardghassemi, S., & Joffe, H. (2022). The causes of loneliness: The perspective of young adults in London's most deprived areas. *Plos one*, *17*(4), e0264638. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0264638

Flanagan, C. (2015). Youth finding meaning through a larger sense of community. *American*

journal of orthopsychiatry, *85*(6S), S70. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000105

Ho, H., & Ito, K. (2019). Consumption-oriented engagement in social network sites: Undesirable influence on personal well-being. *European Journal of Marketing*, *53*(7), 1355-1377. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-11-2017-0809

Jetten, J., Branscombe, N. R., Haslam, S. A., Haslam, C., Cruwys, T., Jones, J. M., ... & Zhang, A. (2015). Having a lot of a good thing: Multiple important group memberships as a source of self-esteem. *PloS one*, *10*(5), e0124609.

Karsay, K., Matthes, J., Schmuck, D., & Ecklebe, S. (2023). Messaging, posting, and browsing: A mobile experience sampling study investigating youth's social media use, affective well-being, and loneliness. *Social Science Computer Review*, *41*(4), 1493-1513. https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393211058308

Lazo, M. P., & Ramos, C. D. (2022). Social media self-expression as form of coping during the 2020 pandemic lockdown. Science and Information Conference, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10464-0_44

Liu, Z., & Xiao, L. (2024). Is It Just About Scrolling? The Correlation of Passive Social Media Use with College Students' Subjective Well-Being Based on Social Comparison Experiences and Orientation Assessed Using a Two-Stage Hybrid Structural Equation Modeling–Artificial Neural Network Method. *Behavioral Sciences*, *14*(12), 1162. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14121162

Murari, K., Shukla, S., & Dulal, L. (2024). Social media use and social well-being: a systematic review and future research agenda. *Online Information Review*, *48*(5), 959-982. https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-11-2022-0608

Roberts, J. A., & David, M. E. (2023). On the outside looking in: Social media intensity, social connection, and user well-being: The moderating role of passive social media use. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*, *55*(3), 240. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/cbs0000323

Sarfraz, M., Ali, M., & Imran, A. (2025). Effects of Social Media on Mental Health: Focusing on Anxiety, Self-Esteem, Social Isolation and Stress on the Public of Rawalpindi, Pakistan. *Online Media and Society*, *6*(1), 16-30. https://doi.org/10.71016/oms/3jxp0122

Schneider, F. M., Zwillich, B., Bindl, M. J., Hopp, F. R., Reich, S., & Vorderer, P. (2017). Social media ostracism: The effects of being excluded online. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *73*, 385-393. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.03.052

Thomas, L., Briggs, P., Hart, A., & Kerrigan, F. (2017). Understanding social media and identity work in young people transitioning to university. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *76*, 541-553. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.08.021

Venugeetha, Y., Rathod, R., & Kumar, R. (2022). Social networking sites in daily life: Benefits and threats. *Artificial intelligence and communication technologies*, 51-64. https://doi.org/10.52458/978-81-955020-5-9-5

Verduyn, P., Ybarra, O., Résibois, M., Jonides, J., & Kross, E. (2017). Do social network sites enhance or undermine subjective well-being? A critical review. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, *11*(1), 274-302. https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12033

Virós-Martín, C., Montaña-Blasco, M., & Jiménez-Morales, M. (2024). Can't stop scrolling! Adolescents' patterns of TikTok use and digital well-being self-perception. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *11*(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03984-5