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Analysing the Relationship between Childhood Trauma and Social Media Addiction among University Students

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ABSTRACT

The widespread adoption of social media has led to increasing concern about its impact on mental health, especially among those who have experienced trauma in their early childhood, who are more likely to engage in addictive behaviours, such as social media addiction. This study investigated the relationship between Childhood Trauma (CT) and Social Media Addiction (SMA) among universities in Pakistan. The study also examined the gender differences between childhood trauma and social media addiction. A convenient sampling technique was employed to collect data; the sample size of 425 university students, age range of 17- 25 years (Male =136, Female =289), were selected from different universities by using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – short form (CTQ), and Social Media Addiction Scale-student form (Urdu version). IBM SPSS software was used to analyse the data and to measure alpha reliability. The findings of the study revealed a significant positive correlation between Childhood Trauma and Social Media Addiction among University students, indicating that a higher level of childhood Trauma results in higher Social Media Addiction. The t-test showed mixed results; there was a significant difference in childhood trauma, while there was no difference in social media Addiction. The study can help policymakers and healthcare professionals in

developing programs and resources to enhance awareness, educate families, develop laws for legislative action, and prohibit all forms of child abuse, to improve the well-being of students, and avoid social media addiction.

Keywords: Childhood Trauma, Social Media Addiction.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from childhood to young adulthood is a dynamic process, which is influenced by many factors such as social media and early experiences in life. In this developing process, one arising issue is the after affects of early life experiences, which can lead to range of addictive behaviours, as well as social media addiction. This study examined the relationship between childhood trauma and social media addiction among young adults, also focusing on the impact of early life experience on media addiction and the gender differences.

Data from the United Nations (2022) individuals aged 15 to 24 constitute about 16% of the world's population, with over 1.2 billion people. In Pakistan, the population of young adults has significant proportion, which is approximately 64% of total population under 30 and about 28% population is between 15 to 29 years old (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). One determined factor for quality of these years is: health. By having good health, all these years can be filled with the freedom to follow what matters. The decline in mental and physical health can impact the well-being of young adults.

The delicate years of moving childhood to young adulthood are often described by social connection and self-examination (Arnett 2006). For the substantial portion of this population, the developmental period can have long-term impacts of childhood trauma (Felitti et al., 1998). Surprisingly, due to filtered realities and durability, social media has become main part of young adults lives (Przybylski et al., 2013).

The impact of early negative experiences has profound effects on mental and emotional health (McEwen, 2008). Often these childhood experiences result in some behavioral addictions such as social media addiction, smartphone addiction, gambling disorders, and substance use addiction (Maté, 2022).

The link between childhood trauma and young adults' addiction to social media is one issue that is becoming more and more problematic. Understanding the complex interactions of social media addiction and childhood trauma requires an understanding of the significant societal changes brought by the digital age. The pervasive nature of smartphones, social networking platforms, and virtual worlds has altered how people interact, and seek information, and how it affects our psychological well-being (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). As a result, this digital transition has now opened up a new field for studying the impact and relationship of early childhood trauma and its possible link to addictive digital behaviors (Király et al., 2020).

Research emphasizes the importance of knowing how these variables interact. For example, studies have explored that individuals who have suffered

childhood trauma may be at higher risk of being vulnerable to using social media as a coping mechanism (O'Connor et al., 2018). Thus, we embark on this exploration, to investigate the connections between childhood trauma and social media addiction. By understanding the interplay between these factors, we can create support systems that address the underlying issues.

Childhood Trauma

The National Institute of Mental Health (USA) offers the framework that describes Childhood trauma as an incident experienced by a child that is emotionally distressing and often leads to long-term mental and physical effects (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021).

A childhood traumatic experience could be anything that makes the child feel afraid and is often violent, hazardous, or even fatal. Trauma may be caused by varieties of unique situations, which are also sometimes referred to as traumatic childhood experiences (Morin Amy, 2023). International studies demonstrate that traumatic events occur frequently all over the world. According to a study, almost half of all children have experienced a minimum of one distressing or traumatic social or familial event (Bethell et al., 2014).

Studies explain that childhood trauma and social media addiction have emerged as a fascinating field of study that raises significant questions about the intricate relationships that exist between early life experiences and contemporary digital behaviors (Johnston et al., 2020). Without a doubt, the allure of social media platforms lies in their seemingly limitless opportunities for self-expression, communication, and idea-sharing. However, given that childhood trauma can have long-lasting effects on mental health due to excessive social media Usage, it is necessary to consider how these two phenomena interact in our interconnected society.

Social Media Addiction

Social media can be a double-edged sword (Smith, 2016) for some people, which help and understanding to some people while also having the drawbacks or to relive adverse memories (Smith, 2016). The social media addiction defined as being extremely linked to social media, attracted by an uncontrollable impulse to log on to or use social media, and spending so much time and energy on social media that it interferes with others' life areas. It is explained by over and excessive usage of social media platforms, which results in the negative consequences on person's physical, mental, and social well-being ,and persistent use regardless of its harmful effects (Musharraf et al., 2023).

Our understanding of human behavior, cognition, and well-being is at a crucial crossroads in an era marked by the widespread influence of digital technology and excessive interconnectedness it makes (Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023). The ubiquitous nature of social media has become main part of young adult's daily routines in the age of digital world (Sumadevi, 2023). No doubt, social media platforms are engaging because they provide an endless number of

opportunities for communication, sharing of ideas, and self-exploration (Akram, 2018).

The research study explores lifelong effects of childhood trauma can interact with the drawbacks of extreme use of social media, and its effect on mental health (Nurius et al., 2015) and well-being (Shonkoff et al., 2012). To uncover this spectrum of childhood trauma, new challenges have been leads to the increase in interconnectedness of the world via technology, including social media (Holloway & Valentine, 2000).

Wartberg and colleagues examined that the excessive use of social media has become norm for young adults in innovative world, focused on reasons such as fear of missing out, staying updated, and continuous need of connectivity as driving factors for this behavior (Wartberg et al., 2020). In January 2023, 31% Pakistani population, used social media in (Toor et al., 2024).

Research published in the Journal of Trauma and Dissociation investigates the relationship between childhood trauma (CT) and dissociation, which caused psychiatric disturbances concerning behavioral addiction. The sample was consist of (n = 633) of young adults age range of (18–34 years). Childhood trauma has strong impact on behavioral addiction. The results suggested that the correlation between early-life trauma and dissociation may lead to a higher issues related to addictive behaviors (Imperatori., 2023).

Another study investigates the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and social media addiction. The sample of 1233 Iranian individuals aged 19 to 65 years were taken, 55.5% were females. By using Survey method technique, the findings revealed that sexual and physical-emotional abuse was correlated with Social Media Addiction. The research reveals that individuals who had traumatic childhood experiences were positively linked with social media addiction. The research also shows that Social Media Addiction was more common among the male population. The study suggested that traumatic childhood experiences may result in a higher risk of addiction to social media in adulthood (Chegeni et al., 2023).

Rationale

The theoretical framework on Childhood Trauma and Social Media Addiction indicated that childhood Trauma is highly significant in dissociation and addictive behaviors. As this phenomenon has gained attention in Western cultures, it remained an unexplored topic in Pakistan. While there is a rapid increase in social media, there's lack of empirical studies that significantly examined the consequences of early childhood experiences and social media usage in Pakistani culture. Therefore, research is required on Childhood Trauma and Social Media Addiction to understand their relationship among young adults in Pakistan in terms of age and gender. This research will not only contribute to the theoretical understanding of childhood trauma and social media addiction but also has the capability to provide practical strategies to improve the quality of life among the young population of Pakistan.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant positive relationship between childhood trauma and social media addiction among young adults.
2. There will be gender differences in childhood trauma and social Media addiction.
3. Childhood Trauma will likely predict the level of social media addiction in young adults.

Method

Sample

This research was conducted recruiting the students (Both Male and Female) of different universities in Punjab. The sample consisted of N=425 students recruited for the study using a convenient sampling technique, which indicates that many students participated in the study, which can enhance the reliability and generalizability of the findings. The age range of the participants was 17 to 25. Participants were chosen from various academic disciplines and educational programs from different universities and colleges of the Government and private sectors.

Roscoe's (1975) method was used to determine sampling size, which explains that the sample size should be ten times bigger than the total number of variables (Roscoe, 1975).

Inclusion Criteria

- Individuals who were between the ages of 17 and 25.
- Participants must have a social media account (such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok) and log on to social media at least once a day.

Research Design and Sampling Technique

The research study employs quantitative, cross-sectional research design to determine the relationship between Childhood Trauma and Social Media Addiction. A convenience sampling technique was used in this study to select participants from a conveniently available student population at the universities. This sample technique was selected because it is simple to use and efficient with time, making it possible to gather data quickly. Students that were willing and able to engage in the study were taken for the sample.

Instruments

The following instruments were used to assess the study variables.

Demographic information

Demographic details of participants, including age, gender, and city, were obtained through a demographic sheet. It was generated based on the requirements of the research study.

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short Form (CTQ-SF)

The CTQ is a 28-item Questionnaire, and a five-point Likert scale (never true to always true) developed by David P. Bernstein & Fink (1998) and revised by Bernstein et al. (2003), which was later redesigned by Tor Alexander Bruce (2019). It is used for assessing the severity of trauma in adolescents and adults. It is one of the

most valid and reliable instruments to measure childhood Trauma. This questionnaire is separated into five domains (emotional abuse, emotional neglect, physical abuse, physical neglect, and sexual abuse). Out of 28 items, 7 items are reversed items – 2, 5,7,13,19,26,28 (Bernstein et al., 2003).

The CTQ-SF was translated and adapted into the Urdu language from a mixed method approach combining Elements from Brislin's (1970) guidelines and WHODAS 2.0 translation principles and guidelines (WHO, 2019). For the statistical analysis, SPSS was utilized. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the scale was 0.85.

Social Media Addiction Scale - student form (SMA-SF)

The 5-Point Likert-type scales for social media addiction range from strongly agree to strongly disagree. It was developed by Cengiz Sahin, with Cronbach's alpha reliability of 0.93. There are 29 items in all, which are categorized into 4 factors: virtual communication, virtual issues, virtual information, and virtual tolerance. This scale is translated in Urdu language by Qurat-ul-ain and her colleagues in Multan, and Cronbach's Alpha = is 0.87 (Musharraf et al., 2023). The measure is sufficiently valid and dependable to assess secondary school, post-secondary education, and university students' addiction to social media.

Procedure

Ethical considerations were carefully observed during the research process. Permissions were taken from the authors of the scales being used in the current study. Furthermore, necessary permissions were obtained from the administrations of universities, ensuring compliance with ethical standards. Informed consent of the participants was taken before gathering data from university students. Participants were informed about the research's nature and purpose, and they were assured that their data would be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. The study sample consisted of university students who were readily available and willing to participate.

RESULTS

In this section, interpretations and findings of the research are reported in detail to fulfill the purpose of the study's objective; different statistical techniques were applied to generate the findings. Besides descriptive statistics, other analyses were also performed to test the study's hypotheses. The current study employed IBM SPSS to generate results.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Range of major study variables (N=425)

Scales	M	SD	Range		Skewness	Kurtosis
			Potential	Actual		
CTQ	57.41	16.67	28 – 140	98	1.42	2.32
SMA	87.84	19.60	29-145	16	-.136	.344

Note: M=Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, CT=Childhood Trauma, SMA=Social Media Addiction.

Table 1 provides a summary of the descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, actual and potential range of scales, and sub-scales. Additionally, it also presents a summary of the Skewness and Kurtosis of the scales and sub-scales.

Table 2

No. of items and alpha reliabilities of all scales (N = 425)

Scales	No. of items	α
CTQ	28	.85
SMAS	29	.85

Note: α = Cronbach's alpha reliability, CTQ=Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, SMAS=Social Media Addiction Scale.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was employed to evaluate the reliability of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire and Social Media Addiction Scale (student form). Table 2 shows good internal consistency of $0.9 > \alpha \geq 0.8$ (Cronbach, 1951).

Table 3

Correlation Coefficients study Variables (N=425)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	CT	SMA
Childhood Trauma	57.41	16.67		
Social Media Addiction	87.84	19.60	.213**	

**p<.05 **p<.01*

Note: CT=Childhood Trauma, SMA=Social Media Addiction.

Table 3 shows significant positive correlation $r(423) = .213, p<.01$ between Childhood Trauma and Social Media Addiction among young adults. This suggests that individuals reporting higher levels of childhood trauma experienced higher levels of social media addiction too.

Table 4

Independent Sample t-test for Gender Differences in Study Variables

Scale	Male		Female		<i>t</i> (423)	<i>p</i>	95% CI		Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Childhood Trauma	60.78	17.49	55.83	17.49	2.88	.002	1.57	8.33	0.28
Social Media Addiction	88.93	17.26	87.32	20.62	.840	.200	2.15	5.37	0.08

**p<.05 **p<.01*

An independent sample t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in childhood trauma (CT) and Social Media Addiction (SMA). Table 4 shows that males (M=60.78) reported significantly higher levels of childhood trauma than

females (M=55.83). As for social media addiction too, males scored slightly higher than females.

Table 5

The Regression Coefficient of Childhood Trauma and Social Media Addiction

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Constant (SMA)	73.43		21.9	0.000
CT	0.25	0.21	4.49	0.000
R ²	.046			

Note; CTQ=Childhood Trauma, SMA=Social Media Addiction

Table 5 shows that childhood trauma significantly predicted social media addiction, $\beta = .21$, $t(425) = 4.49$, $p < .00$, indicating 4.6% of variance ($R^2 = .046$). This explains that higher childhood trauma is associated with higher levels of social media addiction.

DISCUSSION

In this modern era, it is important to understand the impact of childhood trauma and digital habits among young adults. Sometimes it may lead to a range of psychological distortions in adulthood, such as social media addiction. The research aimed to explore the diverse relationship between early childhood experiences and social media addiction among the young generation.

The findings of the research were consistent with the earlier studies (found a similar link between problematic internet use and unfavorable childhood experiences) that reveals there is a strong positive correlation between social media addiction and childhood trauma by applying the Pearson correlation test. According to the findings, people who have gone through traumatic experiences in their growing years are more prone to social media addiction and use social media as a coping mechanism and to avoid unpleasant feelings, which shows the importance of childhood experiences and their possible long-term effects, such as social media addiction (Wei, 2024).

The research also examined gender differences in study variables using an independent sample test. The data revealed that males have more childhood trauma than females, which appears to contradict earlier studies indicating that females suffer more traumatic events than males (Thomas et al., 2022). It may be due to various reasons, such as different geographical regions, sampling populations, and methods. Further research should be conducted to clear this inconsistency in traumatic experiences across genders.

Studies on gender differences in social media have different results. Some studies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) imply that women have more media addiction than men, while other studies by Chegeni et al. (2022) reveal that men have more social media addiction. In contrast to previous findings, my study does not indicate any significant gender difference between males and females.

CONCLUSIONS

The study examined the diverse relationships between Childhood Trauma and social media addiction from the sample of university students from different departments of different universities in Punjab, resulting in a significant correlation between these variables. The findings reveal that individuals who have experienced trauma in their childhood are most likely to engage in social media addiction in their adulthood.

The research also investigates gender differences in social media addiction and childhood trauma, resulting in higher childhood trauma in males than females. In Social media addiction, gender differences are not significant.

Limitation and Suggestions

One of the primary limitations of the study is the narrow age range of the population (17-25), which makes it difficult to generalize the findings to the whole population. Future research should address these limitations by increasing sample size, using more precise data collection method, and exploring some other aspects of research, such as in a clinical setting.

Future Implications

The findings of the study should provide valuable insight for policymakers, social media platforms, and mental health professionals. Therapeutic interventions should address both social media addiction and early childhood experiences, due to their strong correlation to provide better support and treatments to improve overall mental health. Moreover, gender-sensitive approaches to manage trauma and after affects needs to be emphasized, as a high ratio of childhood trauma among boys. To improve the well-being of students and to avoid social media addiction, the laws that forbid all types of child abuse should be established and enforced.

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