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Implications of Social Media Dependency in Pakistan



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Abstract: *This article aims to provide a detailed discourse on the studies that have been conducted in the past four years to assess Pakistani individuals' social media dependency, in the context of media system dependency theory, and its implications on the cognitive and behavioral aspects of their everyday lives. Skimming down to the conclusion, the article addresses strategies that could, if implemented, be beneficial for any hazardous consequences to the well-being of Pakistani social media users and suggests longitudinal studies for looking into the evolving patterns of social media dependency.*

Key Words: Social Media, Media Dependency, Media Dependency Theory, Social Media Dependency, Social media effects on Pakistani Youth, FOMO, Anxiety, Stress, Resilience, Pro-Social Behavior

Introduction

The rise of a new era comprising technological developments has always brought challenges since the onset of its voyage. Not to mention, these developments and their integration into daily use by individuals have remained an integral part of mass media research while assessing the outcomes as a result of gratification (Papacharissi, 2008). Gratification as a result of dependence due to pre-existing motivations has also been in discourse from both traditional and new media perspectives (Amber & Erin, 2018). As the internet became an instant source of communication, the ability of individuals to seek gratifications through usage and dependency expanded. This tilting paradigm of communication provided scope for to scholars to examine users' association with new media from different dynamics

(La Ferle et. al, 2000). Advancement in the new media, particularly social media, had been not much indifferent in this regard. As social media causes much ease while eradicating all obstacles to yield several opportunities for a connection to its users, challenges have taken birth over a period of time. Pakistan has its own challenges and opportunities in the realm of this digital/information age (where everything relies on rapid dispersal and consumption). Much of a debate has been generated in the research arena, particularly during 2020-2023, on social media's reliance and post-consumption impacts on users highlighting a call for alertness and attention (Rizvi et. al. 2019; Ahmad et. al., 2020) General notion to develop preventive strategies have remained on surge after analysis of implications associated with this modern technology (Chassiakos et. al., 2016; Griffiths and Kuss, 2011; Weinstein and Przybylski, 2017b; Bányai et. al., 2017c;

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Anderson & Jiang, [2018](#)). The present study in this domain is a critical review of scholarship that categorizes Pakistani individuals' dependence on social media and the aftermath of mental and social-connectivity outcomes. Recommendations to opt for beneficial strategies for protecting Pakistani individuals' excessive social media dependency and post-consumption outcomes have a provision at the end of this article's section.

Social Media Dependency

Social Media Dependency, an extract of original Media Dependency, is believed to be a reliance formed by users on social media platforms through networking sites or mobile applications. The concept has been widely explored with different dynamics in the context of social media by various scholars belonging to numerous disciplines of social sciences (Bedeian et. al., [1981](#); Joinson et. al., 2008; Barker, [2009](#); Nesi et. al., [2015](#); Yong-Chan and Kim, [2016a](#); Seabrook et. al., [2016b](#); Pallesen et. al., 2017; Marwick et. al., [2011](#)). Its overall generalization in mass communication states it is an involvement of a user to fulfill certain objectives in (i) comprehending the environment around, (ii) becoming an active participant in society, (iii) creating a space for oneself and others within the social media constraints, (iv) communicating through self-disclosure (Yong-Chan and Kim, 2016). Nevertheless, there also comes an association of effects with a dependent's cognitive, affective, and behavioral components in association with a prolonged engagement with media content (Ball-Rokeach and co., [1985](#)).

Understanding

An objective driving individuals to strive for knowledge about self and surroundings is understanding as per classical literature in Media Dependency's earliest conception (Ball-Rokeach and co., [1985](#)). A few researchers have surrounded themselves within the parameters of this first goal of dependency examining it in its accomplishment and results. Some studies undertaken during 2020-2023 by Pakistani researchers have looked into individuals' perception of social benefits and societal welfare; a study by R. Ahmed examined Pakistani youth's reliance on social media during the 2018 general elections of the country aiming to assess how the youngsters interpreted political rallies, political leaders and their agendas alongside electoral obstructions (2022). Another study on the dynamics of social media usage

in the context of gender equality showed how the Pakistani public utilized its need for surveillance and awareness through social media campaigns related to women's rights (2020).

Orientation

In the classical conception of Media Dependency Theory, the second objective that inclines people to get associated with media is a need to connect with self and surroundings i.e. action/interaction orientation (Ball-Rokeach and co., [1985](#)). Within the frame of this context, scholarship contributed to how Pakistani individuals opted for safety measures during the global pandemic, i.e. an outburst of COVID-19, after getting educated by different sources. It is worth mentioning that communication experts have long observed that the human tendency to make decisions comes more from personal interaction and social relationships than the media itself (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rogers, 1962). Keeping this in consideration, Irfan and associates (2023) conducted a survey on the basis of media as a public orientation tool to inquire about contributing factors potentially responsible for people's decision-making in getting vaccinated against the viral variants, such as psychological, religious, social, and cultural. Hussein and Hassan ([2020](#)) aimed to explore the media's authenticity with that of the audience's trust in the political regime. The findings of their study exposed social media to be an unreliable source of official information dispersion as compared to news websites. Relatively, another study compared the roles of both traditional as well as social media in molding the audience/users' opinions about the contagiousness of COVID-19. Findings revealed that Pakistani people relied more on traditional media in comparison to social media and suggested transparency of information on social media (Abida et. al., 2021).

Play

The third proposition of Media Dependency states individual reliance on media for the attainment of their individual or social sphere (Ball-Rokeach and co., [1985](#)). From a perspective of social media dependence, scholarships vary with entertainment and online gaming; research conducted by Khan and Ali ([2021](#)) aimed to assess cognitive patterns and academic output associated with an individual's online involvement on social media for the purpose of escapism and amusement. In addition to this, Nisar

alongside his associate (2023) focused his research on youngsters and how their need for entertainment encapsulated their daily lives. Relatively, Ahmed, Z. and Rehman, S. (2021) interrogated college students' association with social media to learn ways for their day-to-day decision-making as a result of exposure to entertainment.

Expression

A need for introduction and a freedom to talk is one of the core needs of human civilization since existence. Within the modern mediascape of digital communication yielding a two-way circulation (Phillips, 2008) to self-reveal (Van Dijck, 2013), a fourth and last objective looked onto by users is expression as included by Yong-Chan in his research study of SNS Dependency on community building (2016). Stepping into the premises of Pakistan, the Constitution Article 19 states that every citizen holds a right to freedom of speech and individualism. From a perspective of social media dependency, Pakistan being an under-developed country still needs a check and balance of the digital content in dispersion on social media which is mostly sewn in the fabrics of unreliable and unauthentic information giving rise to an anti-unity approach amid ethnic groups of the country as well as directly pressing the psychological nerve to initiate an attack on national interests of the state (Hussain et. al., 2021). From micro-analysis of social media dependency, scholarship comprises a pool of studies to integrate social media usage with a need to self-disclose or share opinions in Pakistani users, especially youth; Aftab and Khan, (2020) concluded that a need to hold onto ongoing trends on social media, an ability to self-disclose sometimes becomes non-vague in displaying genuine information (2020). Another research by Khan and Qureshi (2021) identified social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as opportunity providers for young people to articulate their identities and life experiences in the form of sharing statuses, videos, photos, or live broadcasts. Meanwhile giving the utmost significance to self-identity, Javed and Ali argued that social media provide immense opportunities for a user to convey his/her narratives on a wider wavelength (2022).

Implications of Social Media Dependency

With profound incorporation into the routine lives of Pakistani individuals, social media has left no second thought on not relying on it for better accessibility of

speech. However, with an urge for instant communication comes the outcomes. This section narrows down the key findings of most of the studies taken into consideration while evaluating Pakistani people's social media usage and effects. The present paper reviews the two core effects, cognitive and behavioral, in accordance with Media Dependency Theory, as post-consumption of social media content.

Cognitive

Every individual, being naturally curious, learns about the world and environment from the media. For this, an individual is free to make a choice for content selection (Batts and Herring, 2013). Moreover, no two individuals need to intrude with another fellow mate (Ashfaq, 2021). Engagement with social media has been found to be affecting an individual's psyche in numerous studies in the past (Holland and Tarlow, 2007; Tandoc et. al., 2015a; Frison et. al., 2015b; Twenge and Campbell, 2018a; Berryman et. al., 2017; Huang, 2020). There is a wide scholarship initiating a discourse on social media usage's implications on an individual's frequency or duration of exposure, level of satisfaction, attention span/focus, personal and social identity, stress management, resilience, and sense of accomplishment (Cummings et. al., 2002; Kang & Watt, 2013; Hayes et. al., 2015; Beyens et. al., 2016; Samaha, 2017). Concerns about post-consumption of social media signal a most important component i.e. a user's mental health. Subsequently, the research arena of vast disciplines is filled with social media consumption and hazardous imprints on the psychological well-being of individuals. Frequency or Duration of Exposure: Impacts commonly associated with heavy usage of social media are depression, anxiety, and stress (Raza & Hussain, 2019).

Level of Satisfaction: Moreover, a social comparison of one's lifestyle with others in online communication is believed to yield negative impacts on an individual's self-esteem (Malik and Iqbal, 2022).

Attention Span/Focus: From a particular lens of assessing an individual's cognitive ability to memorize and recall, a study finding by Shah and Rehman revealed that prolonged exposure to social media causes mental impairments such as short-term memory loss and distorted concentration in the offline environments of users. Also with an 'information overload', complexity rises in cognitive relaxation resulting in mental fatigue (2023).

Personal and Social Identity: Naz and Gul (2021) report women bear higher levels of social media dependency in comparison to men for seeking beauty validations within online communicative integration to meet standards of physical appearance.

Stress Management: Lodhi and Ahmad define stress to be a resultant influence, having the same effect of all the external stressors to be added, alongside an individual's coping capability (2021). Most of the research scholars have erected their studies on the foundations of Social Cognitive Theory to observe this particular outcome of social media dependency (Bandura, 2001; Caplan, 2007; Borah, 2017; Chung et. al., 2020). Another common phenomenon found in the research arena within the parenthesis of social media effects is the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), a concept classically defined by Festinger (1954). Several debates deal with this as a constant anxious urge of social media surfing to remain connected with their networked contacts' updates (Murayama et. al., 2013; D. Alt, 2015; Liss et. al., 2017; Buglass et. al, 2017); Shahid and Saeed, 2022 argued that heavy exposure to social media heightened the FOMO in students causing poor academic performance and personal welfare (2022). Similar to their study findings, Ijaz and his associate (2021) revealed that social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram were fueling surging stress levels in youngsters due to their feature of constructed-reality representations. Furthermore, a positive correlation between FOMO and psychological effects was depicted by the findings of another research by Rauf et. al. (2023). Onwards, social media addiction showed a linear connection with FOMO in the research findings of Farooq and Hussain (2022).

Resilience: This is an individual's mental strength defined as a reversion to both physical and psychological coping points in adversity or stress (Masten 2013; Becker et. al., 2000). In his study titled, 'Exploring the dual effects of social media on resilience: A study of Pakistani social media users', Farhan with his colleagues discovered two sides of a coin; social media as a positive influencer of social support and plunging resilience in the users. The researchers concluded by emphasizing upon a neutral strategy for consuming social media to sustain the resilient potential of youth (2023).

Accomplishment: Ali et al. (2022) found a positive association between personal growth and social media dependency for educational, and professional

networking purposes. According to Malik et. al. (2022), those who utilize social media platforms for networking, goal-setting, and self-improvement feel more accomplished.

Behavioral

Each member is a constituent of a societal framework where connectivity molds him/her into a cycle of inter-connective dependence. Much of this binding takes place through action and display. For such an interconnectivity, media assists in determining opportunities for individuals to build their social ties (Ashfaq, 2021). Where a wide number of studies discuss adverse outcomes of social media post-consumption, therein exists an optimistic notion for social integration and community building through social media usage. Some scholarships have unveiled social media usage's implications on an individual's collective actions for social good or reformation, volunteering, visitation and traveling, and social connectivity adhering to commonality (Wilson, 2012a; Hughes et. al., 2012b; Wang, 2014a; Vissers, 2014b; Boulianne, 2016; Chen et. al., 2016). In the context of the Pakistani region, the following studies have been conducted:

Collective Actions: University students were observed with their pro-social behavior with their patterns of involvement with social media. Results of this study (2022) revealed that slight social media dependency was directly proportional to the positive outcomes like charity and activism whereas high social media dependency was related to lesser offline interactions for a social cause (Khan and associates). Relative to their findings was a revelation in another research by Naeem et. al. (2021) who compared online and offline pro-social behavior of users in order to gauge a real predictor of collective action by post-consumption of social media engagement. The results found no difference to the study findings of Khan et. al.; 2023 online participation in social welfare did not outshine offline participation in social welfare. Similar research findings were found in a study titled, 'Youth Engagement in Pro-Social Activities Through Social Media: A Pakistani Perspective'; an over-reliance on social media caused minimal pro-social effect (Shah and associates, 2023). It is worth mentioning that this behavioral effect has also been erected on the theoretical foundations of Social Learning Theory and the Technology Acceptance Model.

Volunteering: In the classical definition of Wilson (2021), 'Giving of one's time and services with consent and without expectation of any compensation or reward is called volunteering. It promotes social networks and community involvement, and is seen as an essential part of civil society.' With evolving adaptations across social media's communicative patterns, individuals and organizations can now connect with ease to form dependence for yielding meaningful social outputs (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Ahmed et. al. (2022) signified the binding force of social media campaigns with volunteers in disastrous situations like earthquakes and floods (2021). Observing the strength of social media, Javed and associates (2022) found that individuals tended to opt for digital activism rather than traditional modes of volunteering. Engagement in pro-social behavior also showed variance for men and women in a study conducted by Aslam and Akhtar (2023); women were found to be more inclined toward online volunteering meanwhile men tended to take an interest in offline social activities. Volunteering in collaboration with social media campaigns also bore positivity with users' psychological health in the study findings of Fatima and associates (2022).

Visitation and Traveling: As per community engagement and the pro-social attribute of human connectivity, users surf, plan, and execute plans for leisure activities encompassing traveling and visits. Literature depicts a high usage of YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram for this purposeful activity where users fulfill their need to know gratification by skimming through their peers' posts, reading reviews, and watching content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2021). In accord to study findings by Saleem and Abbas (2021), the Pakistani adventurous lot prefers to remain updated with information related to places and sites with the help of social media. A survey analysis of Pakistani youngsters from major cities of the country revealed that their choice of destinations was in direct association with higher social media dependency. This inclined them to search popular hashtags rather than consulting traditional travel agents (Khan et. al., 2022). Contrary to the above findings, a profound involvement with social media to seek validation about one's trip is found to cause an actual disengagement with moments in the present; individuals who relied merely on sharing updates about their trip were likely not to amuse themselves from real moments (Hassan and associate, 2023). From an environmental welfare perspective, social media is believed to enhance

travelers' knowledge in particular reference to eco-friendly practices. The findings also concluded that frequent visitations to similar places were also common for an intention of getting social validation from online connections displaying it as 'environmental degradation' (Qureshi and associate, 2022). Anxiety and stress are also found to be contributing factors in ruining an individual's traveling experience in case of a constant urge to update information on social media (Ali and associate, 2023). Emphasizing gender perception on visitation and traveling, it is found that women were likely to get inspired by social media trends more as compared to men. However, men outshined women in their social media dependence on sharing moments and experiences (Zafar et. al., 2020).

Social Connectivity Adhering Commonality: One of the major goal-driven intentions behind pro-social activity is to reach out to individuals sharing common interests, beliefs, and values. For this social media platforms have eased ways for users across global borders. Through social media, users may connect with others to build virtual communities that are not limited by geography. These platforms give people a place to share ideas, work together on projects, and support causes they care about (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In spite of its optimistic essence, a study's (2021) findings portrayed that a higher dependency on social media for social connectivity with like-minded individuals was likely to cause surging superficial interactions instead of real ones. To understand gender behavior in regard to social networking, a survey analysis was conducted by Bibi and associates (2023) that resulted in an enthusiastic approach of female students with academic interest groups on social media surpassing male students who only showed interest in sharing information. In pursuit of professional guidance and networking, Ali found young career-oriented individuals to be getting facilitated by the social media site, LinkedIn. However, this preference for online engagement hindered their offline participation as a whole (2022).

Discussion: Following an in-depth analysis of the above studies, it can be summarized that Pakistani individuals' reliance on social media will mold as per the revolution of the modern mediascape. The outcomes are less likely positive and depict results that do not bear consensus with any favorable scales of desire. Firstly, precise exposure to social media can bring about safety measures for users' mental health. This can be achieved with chronic breaks from social media

platforms for the provision of opportunities to connect with one's offline environment. Secondly, a tilt in relief-seeking motive can also work if individuals practice mindfulness through meditation and yoga instead of remaining attached to their social media accounts for emotional stability. Thirdly, in addition to this, peer support groups can prove beneficial for letting users vent out about their inability to get disengaged with social media platforms to experience life outside a

virtual window (offline social connectivity). Last but not least, self-regulation and mastery over it could prevent much damage to the overall well-being of a user. The suggested future direction for academicians and researchers is to conduct longitudinal observations of individuals and their evolving social media dependency patterns. This could be beneficial in terms of a better identification of the pros and cons of usage duration and exposure.

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