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Abstract: *The aim of the current study was to investigate the association between social media, sleep problems and disclosure of emotions among university students. The survey design employed was a cross-sectional design with 300 students between the ages of 18-26 years (50% female and 50% male) who filled out the Chen Internet Addiction Scale, Sleep Quality Scale and Distress Disclosure Index. Results showed that there was a significant positive correlation between problematic sleep and the use of social media ($r = .286, p < .01$), meaning more social media correlates with worse sleep outcomes. But no strong correlations were found between socio-demographic variables and emotional self-disclosure ($r = .023, p > .05$) and problematic sleep ($r = -.024, p > .05$) respectively, and between emotional self-disclosure and problematic sleep ($r = -.139, p > .05$). The emotional self-disclosure construct did not mediate the social media-sleep relationship (indirect effect $\beta = .000, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.008, .005]$). Results suggest that compulsive social media use is directly linked to sleep problems, even after controlling for emotional disclosure behaviors, indicating a need to intervene on decreasing nocturnal social media use, and not the role of disclosure behaviors.*

Introduction

In the era of social media, communication, information access and social interaction among young adults in the world is fundamentally changed. Recent estimates have shown that around 95% of adolescents and young adults currently have at least one social media account, and on average spend around 6-8 hours a day on their social media platforms (Anderson & Jiang, 2023). Although social media is widely praised for its positive effects such as increased connectivity and social support, and access to educational opportunities, there have been notable negative effects, such as poorer sleep patterns and emotional regulation (Alonzo et al., 2021).

Worryingly, university students' sleep disturbance has become an epidemic across the world. Multiple studies have shown that a lack of sleep has detrimental effects on cognitive function, school

achievement, emotional well-being, and long-term physical health (Dhir et al., 2021; Nakshine et al., 2022). Walsh et al., (2020) and Yang et al., (2025) revealed that one in seven students exhibited poor sleep quality, with a larger proportion in recent years, and that social media use has grown among students during the times immediately preceding sleep and during the night.

Emotional self-disclosure refers to the act of providing others with personal feelings, thoughts and experiences and is considered to be a fundamental aspect of social interaction and psychological well-being (Smithson, J., 2025). Social media platforms have introduced a novel, unprecedented form of self-disclosure an opportunity to broadcast personal content instantly, publicly, and to an unprecedented extent (Luo & Hancock, 2020). This change prompts questions of both the positive and negative aspects of online disclosure on sleep outcomes for young adults.

Current research study takes a critical examination at an important gap in the literature by exploring mediation between connections among compulsive social media/hyper-use and sleeping disorders in the shape of emotional self-disclosure. Previous studies have shown bivariate relationships between these variables (Dhir et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2025), but the mechanisms behind them are not fully known. The importance of the role of emotional disclosure as an explanatory mechanism have implications for intervention design; there needs to be a differential approach to both clinical and educational interventions.

Literature Review

Percious research studies shows that there are several key characteristics of compulsive or problematic social media use: highly loss of control over social media use despite knowledge of negative consequences, preoccupying thoughts with social media, and continued use despite its interference with daily functioning tasks (Kolhar et al., 2021; Sagar et al., 2022). The prevalence among university students from 15% to 45% among cultures (Brautsch et al., 2023; Chu et al., 2023), with a general upward trend since the COVID-19 pandemic has occurred. According to compensatory Internet use model, psychological distress serves to motivate people to use the Internet as an alternative, which can paradoxically lead to their psychological problems becoming more severe (Kross et al., 2021; Siste et al., 2021). Fear of missing out (FoMO) has become well established as a strong predictor of problematic use (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020; Schmickler et al., 2023). Social media is found to engage similar reward pathways as people with substance use disorders, with around 30% of students claiming to have become addicted to their devices (Sreejesh et al., 2020; Windred et al., 2024).

The sleep disturbance associated with the nighttime disorder of sleeping can be defined as: difficulty initiating sleep, poor sleep quality and inadequate sleep duration, for the developmental needs (Keles et al., 2020). The average amount of sleep that university students get per night is only 35% of the suggested 7-9 hours (Hong et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2025). There is evidence that sleep disturbance impacts academic achievement, the likelihood of depression and anxiety, and executive functioning (Freeman et al., 2020; Chu et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2025). Longitudinal studies suggest that sleep dysfunctions are associated with long-term cardiovascular, metabolic and mental health repercussions (Montag et al., 2024; Putra et al., 2025). The etiology involves a complex interplay across the spectrum of biological, environmental, behavioral, and psychological factors to which social media interactions intersect (Zewude et al, 2025; Kim et al., 2024).

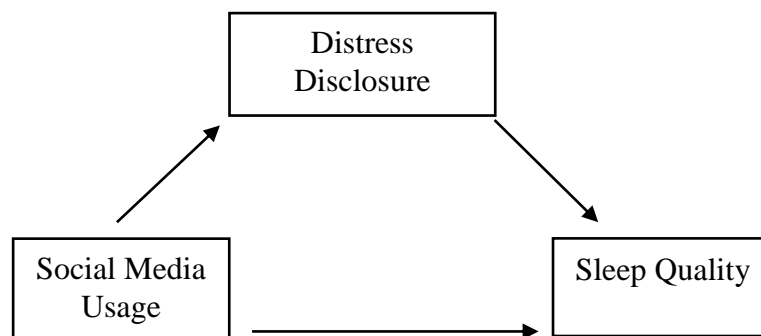
There is a consistent positive relationship between social media use and sleep disturbance. Based on 42 studies (N = 85,000), this meta-analysis revealed a pooled correlation of $r = .28$ - which varied from $r = .35$ associated with nighttime-specific use and $r = .41$ associated with problematic use (Al-Farsi et al., 2025; Luo & Hancock, 2020). There are many reasons for this relationship. The displacement hypothesis

suggests social media causes a loss of sleep, with each hour using a social media app being linked to 12-15 minutes of sleep loss (Brautsch et al., 2023). The arousal mechanism provides a line of evidence for alertness or cognitive-emotional activation from viewing online content as being interfering with the sleep transition process (Walsh et al., 2020). Light mediated pathway means that the melatonin hormone decreases by about 55% when exposed to blue-wavelength light (Kross et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024). Further, it has been shown that compulsive checking, bedtime procrastination, and anticipatory anxiety also negatively impact sleep quality (Siste et al., 2021; Alonzo et al., 2021).

Hong et al (2020); Kahn (2021) argue that one of the key roles of self-disclosure is to foster intimacy development and emotion regulation, as well as, identity construction. Social media has shifted disclosure practices in the sense of having context collapse (Sreejesh et al., 2020), which means that disclosure is now happening with trusted friends and now thousands of contacts. Since most of the nonverbal communication is removed in this type of interaction, text-based communication can make it easier to disinhibit (Montag et al., 2024; Kolhar et al., 2021). The amount of explicit emotional expression is about 40% with negative emotions occurring more frequently (Otsuka et al., 2021).

There has been very little empirical work on relationships between Sleep and Disclosure. According to the emotional regulation perspective, folks who undergo disclosure learn to decrease their pre-sleep cognitive arousal, which is accomplished by offloading their concerns (Anderson et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 202). There are studies on expressive writing that have shown that sharing stressful experiences helps adolescents who tend to ruminate get better sleep (Schlosser et al., 2020). On the other hand, public broadcast disclosure can raise the activation of social evaluation, response checking, and rumination, which can result in pre-sleep activation (Freeman et al., 2020; Chu et al., 2023). Eliciting negative feedback and cybervictimisation may lead to some distress in the user which may hamper sleep (Wang et al., 2025).

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework



Source: By Author

Although there is a logical reason to study emotional self-disclosure as a mediator between the relationship of social media and sleep, there is little empirical evidence. Dhir et al. (2021) revealed that self-disclosure was indirectly related to poor sleep via increased stalking and compulsive use. According to Luo and Hancock (2020), the disclosure breadth and depth explained sleep quality, and their effects varied with closeness in relationships. A simple mediation model was tested that investigates if variance in the relations between problematic social media use and problematic sleep is mediated by emotional self-disclosure. A better understanding of this mechanistic pathway is important for implications of interventions; if disclosure is a mediator in this pathway, interventions can be targeted towards healthy disclosure practices; otherwise, resources can shift to alternative pathways such as the role of time management or light exposure.

Rationale of the Study

Through the existing literature there are three key points that are established, which are supported by well-documented evidence: first, that the use of social media is linked to sleeping difficulties; second, that access to social media can provide access to a lot of emotional disclosure; and third, that emotional disclosure is related to positive and negative psychological outcomes. There are still gaps that need to be addressed, however. First, there has been no direct testing of the mediating role of emotional self-disclosure between compulsive social media use and problematic sleep in university students, which is of critical importance because the process of mediation both suggested and warranted targeting of emotional disclosure practices (with mediation) vs. of time management or light (without mediation). Secondly, previous studies have mainly focused on high school students or young adults in general, and fewer studies have been conducted to analyse the sleeping conditions of university students who have other special sleep characteristics such as irregular sleeping schedules, academic loading and a characteristic context for the environment. Third, previous research has tended not to utilize multi-dimensional measures in one study that have been validated for all three constructs. Accordingly, gaps in the current study came forward by testing a mediation model with the use of established instruments by validated psychometrics in the course of a measurement trial in a special sample of the students of universities.

Hypothesis of the Study

H1: There is likely to be a significant positive relationship between compulsive social media usage and problematic sleep among university students.

H2: There is likely to be a significant positive relationship between compulsive social media usage and emotional self-disclosure.

H3: Emotional self-disclosure is likely significantly mediate the relationship between compulsive social media usage and problematic sleep.

Methodology

Study Method

A cross-sectional, correlational survey method was used in the present research to explore the relationship between these three variables: compulsive social media use, self-disclosure emotions, and problematic sleep in university students.

Participants and Sampling

An age range of 18 to 26 years, 150 male and 150 female university students of both the public sector universities (85%) and private sector universities (15%) were selected in Sialkot, Pakistan by applying convenience sampling technique. The bulk of the participants were middle class in position (87.3 %), middle class in family type (66.3 %) and middle class in family functionalism (98.3 %). The inclusion criteria were: being between the ages of 18 and 26; having at least one social media account; using social media for at least five hours per day; and consenting to and willingness to participate. Those who had a physical, psychiatric or sleep disorder or were taking medication for sleep were excluded.

Measures

The Chen Internet Addiction Scale (CIAS; 26-items; 4-point likert) was used to measure compulsive social media use with good reliability ($\alpha=.89$) across five different subscales. The Sleep Quality Scale (SQS; 28 items, 4-point scale) was used to measure sleep domains with acceptable levels of reliability ($\alpha = .72$). The DDI (12 items, 5-point Likert) assessed psychological distress disclosure and had a marginal acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .54$). Information was obtained on age, socioeconomic status, family system and background information with the use of a demographic questionnaire.

Procedure

After the ethical approval and permission of the instruments, data collection was done within two months. Researchers added in university environment, and explained the procedure of the study, written informed consent was obtained and paper questionnaires were administered to the subjects. For people with reading problems items were read aloud to them. 25-30 minutes were needed for each session. Confidentiality and no penalty for withdrawal was ensured.

Data Analysis

SPSS Version 26 was used for analysis. The relationships hypothesized were assessed using Pearson correlation. The role of emotional self-disclosure as a mediator in the relationship between social media and sleep was explored through mediation analysis (Process Model 4) with 5,000 bootstraps. A value of $\alpha=.05$ (two-tailed) was used as the critical value for statistical significance.

Results

4.1 Correlation Analysis

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Matrix of study variables (N = 300)

Variable	1	2	3	4	M	SD
1. Age	-				1.56	.50
2. Social Media Usage	-.023	-			64.29	14.00
3. Emotional Self-Disclosure	.106	.023	-		33.54	6.27
4. Problematic Sleep	.173**	.286**	-.024	-	67.22	9.10

Note: ** $p < .01$

The results show that for Hypothesis 1 (social media usage and problematic sleep) showed a positive small to moderate effect size for social media use and problematic sleep ($r = .286, p < .01$), confirming the link between social media usage and problematic sleep. The correlation between Social Media use and emotional disclosure was positive ($r = .023$) but non-significant ($p > .05$) which contradicted Hypothesis 2, emotional disclosure and problematic sleep showed a negative correlation which was also not statistically significantly related ($r = -.024$) ($p > .05$). A significant positive correlation was found between age and problematic sleep ($r = .173, p < .01$) reflecting that more sleep problems were reported by older students.

Mediation Analysis

Table 2. Mediation Analysis Results: Emotional Self-Disclosure as Mediator

Effect	Path	β	SE	p	95% CI
Total	SMU → PS	.186	.036	.000	[.115, .257]
Direct	SMU → PS	.186	.036	.000	[.115, .257]
Indirect	SMU → ESD → PS	.000	.003	—	[-.008, .005]

Note: SMU = Social Media Usage; PS = Problematic Sleep; ESD = Emotional Self-Disclosure; CI based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples

Mediation analysis was conducted using an approach based on PROCESS software and 5,000 bootstrap resampling to determine if emotional self-disclosure was a mediator between the relationship between social media and sleep. The total effect of social media usage on problematic sleep was significant ($\beta = .186$, $SE = .036$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.115, .257]), and the direct effect remained virtually unchanged after controlling for emotional self-disclosure ($\beta = .186$, $SE = .036$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.115, .257]). Most importantly, the indirect effect was not statistically significant ($\beta = .000$, $SE = .003$, 95% CI [-.008, .005]) and the bootstrap confidence interval crossed zero, meaning there was no mediation. Thus, the hypothesis of 3 was not upheld, as the relationship between problematic sleep and social media use through emotional self-disclosure did not add any further variance.

Discussion

The current research study focused on relationships between CSM, PS and ESD among 300 university students with ages ranging from 18 to 26 years. Three major results were obtained: Again, as with prior studies (Yang et al., 2025; Dhir et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2025), use of social media positively correlated with problematic sleep ($r = .286$, $p < .01$). Students who wrote higher on compulsive social media engagement endorsed worse sleep symptoms (sleep initiation, sleep maintenance, and daytime sleep symptoms). Second, contrary to the hypotheses, usage of social media was not correlated with emotional self-disclosure ($r = .023$, $p > .05$), which is a contentious finding given expectations that more social media engagement would lead to higher disclosure of emotional distress. Third, and most importantly, there was no indirect effects by emotional self-disclosure between social media and problematic sleep ($\beta = .000$, CI [-.008, .005]). It is important to note that this indirect effect was non-significant and that mechanisms connecting SMM use to sleep disruption did not rely on the mediation of emotional self-disclosure.

The very positive association between social media use and sleep problems in the present study corroborates the findings of the meta-analysis conducted by Schmickler et al. (2023) and also Nakshine et al. (2022) which both revealed a positive relationship between the use of social media and sleep problems and contained no samples of Pakistani university students. The correlation observed ($r = .286$) is similar to typical sizes found in Western samples, which shows that there is cross-cultural consistency. This relationship is perhaps caused by multiple factors such as displacement of sleep time, blue light causing circadian disruption, or cognitive-emotional arousal from engaging content (Zewude et al., 2025; Hudson et al., 2020). One may consider the negative findings between emotional self-disclosure and use of social media as being explained by limitations of measurement as it measures emotional self-disclosure in general and not platform-specific. The DDI may be capturing less about more mundane kinds of experiences relating to one's social media use, rather than about more emotional experiences, where heavy social media users might be talking about, and disclosing, more about the mundane experiences. Social media, on the other hand, might replace, rather than add to, disclosure in person (Schlosser et al., 2020; Kross et al., 2021).

The most significant take away of the study is the null mediation finding. Findings indicate that emotional self-disclosure is not explanatory of sleep disturbances caused by social media use, which means social media interventions to sleep disturbance should be directed towards alternative mechanisms. Mechanisms that more specifically target sleep, such as time-based mechanisms (bedtime procrastination, reduction of sleep opportunity), light-based mechanisms (melatonin suppression, circadian phase delay), and arousal-based mechanisms (cognitive activation, emotional reactivity) seem more promising targets (Putra et al., 2025; Sagar et al., 2022).

Based on clinical and public health perspectives, the findings have a number of recommendations for

action. The interventions related to sleep hygiene for university students should directly focus on users' social media content prior to bedtime (60-90 min before going to sleep) instead of the information itself; the interventions should include the removal of devices from bedrooms, or their use of applications that block blue light (Keles et al., 202; Windred et al., 2024). What problematic social media use is manifested should be included in routine sleep screening by university health services. It's important to psychoeducation on reducing engagement or multiple interactions at night, even if the content, in and of itself, is not altered, to enhance sleep outcomes. Platform designers should have the choice of default "sleep mode" setting which restricts late-night use and/or of giving users an individual usage breakdown (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020).

Limitations and Recommendations

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are a number of restrictions. The cross-sectional design does not allow for any causal inferences to be drawn from the data; a bidirectional/explanation by a third variable relationship might hold true. Some factors affecting sleep quality might lead to more use of social media, and various personality traits like neuroticism could be linked to both social media use and inadequate sleep. All studies were self-report that could have been subject to recall bias and common method variance. This marginal level of reliability for the DDI (0.54) is significant and could be dampening the associations between emotional self-disclosure. Limited generalizability as it was drawn from one geographic area (Sialkot, Pakistan). Research in the future should use longitudinal designs, objective tracking tools (screen time tracking, actigraphy, actual posts linguistic analysis), and variable samples to fully capture mechanisms and evidence-based guidance for healthy technology use.

Conclusion

The current study analysed if there was a mediating effect between problematic sleep and compulsive social media use among university students with regard to emotional self-disclosure. Use of social media was indeed significantly associated with poorer sleep quality and the results revealed that emotional self-disclosure did not mediate this relationship; however, contrary to expectations, use of social media was not significantly associated with disclosure tendency. Findings reveal that interventions should focus directly on social media use at night and not on emotional disclosure patterns because the relationships between social media and sleep disruption, such as by displacing sleep, providing light and stimulating the brain, are not linked to disclosure of emotional thoughts online.

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