

## Social media use, anxiety, depression, and attitudes toward counselling among young adults

Nistha Jain

Research Assistant, Woxsen University, Kamkole, Sadasivpet, Hyderabad, India

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** In recent years, there has been a lot of discussion on how social media affects the psychological well-being of young adults. The purpose of the present study is to essentially identify the relationship between attitude towards seeking professional help and usage of social media. In addition, we aim to identify the relationship between attitude towards seeking professional help and anxiety and depression and whether one affects the other in the latter two variables. **Materials and methods:** Using A convenience sampling technique 92 young adults, between the ages 18-25 years, from the Kolkata urban area voluntarily participated in the study. Attitude Toward Seeking Professional Help, Beck Depression Inventory, Beck Anxiety Inventory and Social Media Engagement Questionnaire, were administered using Google Form. **Results:** The results depicted no significant correlation between attitudes toward seeking professional help and either anxiety or depression, nor between these attitudes and social media usage. However, a significant positive correlation between anxiety and depression was identified, consistent with previous research on their comorbidity. The high variance in the data, potentially due to a diverse sample, suggests the need for larger, more representative samples in future research. **Conclusion:** Despite the increasing use of social media to raise mental health awareness, this has not translated into significant changes in attitudes toward seeking professional help. The study underscores the necessity of addressing the deep-rooted stigma surrounding mental health and highlights the importance of educating the next generation on prioritizing mental health.


**Keywords:** Social media use, anxiety, depression, young adults, professional help seeking

### INTRODUCTION

The influence of social media on the psychological well-being of young adults has garnered significant attention in recent years. As a pervasive element of modern life, social media plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes, behaviours, and emotional states, particularly among individuals aged 18 to 25. This age group, often considered to be at a pivotal stage in personal and professional development, is highly susceptible to the impacts of digital interaction.

Attitude occupies one of the central positions in the field of social psychology. It is described as an individual's predisposition to evaluate an object or its symbol in a particular manner.<sup>[1]</sup> Although attitudes are generally enduring, they are also subject to change. They are widely discussed not merely as intellectual constructs

but as entities comprising affective and behavioural components.<sup>[2]</sup> In a study, Chadda and Deb,<sup>[3]</sup> delineated that Indian families are more of a collectivistic and pluralistic where people are codependent, and are concerned with the feelings of belongingness and need for approval from adults with a need to be in-groups often at the expense of self. Personal space, autonomy, are considered secondary while maintaining the 'relationship' is the primary task. Often, in such an environment the attitude towards seeking professional help can be negative in reference to their need for approval from adults. Attitudes regarding particular activities are influenced by a variety of factors, including assessments of the behaviour's expected effects and the social norms surrounding it. Researchers have found that attitudes toward particular behaviours can

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#### Address for Correspondence:

Ms. Nistha Jain

Research Assistant, Woxsen University, Kamkole, Sadasivpet, Hyderabad, Telangana – 502345 India

Email: nisthajain39@gmail.com

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be used to accurately predict people's actions.<sup>[4,5]</sup> This suggests that individuals with a positive attitude toward seeking help are more likely to visit a counsellor during times of distress.

Counselling is more than just a series of interactions between individuals; it functions as a social institution deeply embedded in the culture of modern industrialized societies. The primary objective of counselling is to aid clients in understanding and clarifying their life circumstances, enabling them to achieve self-determined goals through informed, meaningful decisions and the resolution of emotional or interpersonal issues.<sup>[6]</sup> While some studies suggest a rise in the number of persons receiving psychological therapy, a sizable proportion of people continue to decline help for mental health problems. Underutilization is influenced by stigma,<sup>[7,8]</sup> unwillingness to reveal the condition,<sup>[9]</sup> and anticipated expenses.<sup>[10]</sup> A consistent increase in the mental health services as well as acceptance by people in India, especially by Gen-Z towards the same is very much evident. Despite the steady increase, the disparity between help seekers and non-seekers does not seem to be declining.<sup>[11]</sup>

Depression, classified as a mood disorder, encompasses feelings of sadness, loss, or anger that interfere with daily activities.<sup>[12]</sup> Although anxiety is typically viewed as a high-energy state and depression as a low-energy state, the two conditions are more interrelated than commonly perceived. Anxiety can manifest as a symptom of major depression, while depression can be triggered by anxiety disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, or separation anxiety disorder. Many individuals receive diagnoses for both anxiety disorders and clinical depression concurrently.<sup>[13]</sup>

A study in UAE highlighted that college students preferred non-professional sources of help such as family and friends in times of distress.<sup>[14]</sup> Another study found out that in a college where psychotherapy was provided as a free in-campus service, only a small amount of students who screened positive for depression pursued therapy.<sup>[15]</sup> A qualitative study on Turkish university students revealed their opinions on seeking psychological help fall under seven themes, including costs, counsellor

competency, and perception errors. Many have negative attitudes, citing high fees, unqualified counsellors, and doubts about its effectiveness.<sup>[16]</sup> These studies suggest that despite the availability of services, students' help-seeking behaviour is hindered by affordability issues, mistrust, and a reliance on non-professional support networks.

Social media, defined as computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through virtual networks and communities, plays a significant role in contemporary society. According to a study, social media networking sites profoundly influence youth, shaping their thoughts and behaviours.<sup>[17]</sup> Its omnipresence can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and stress, potentially leading to higher levels of anxiety and depression. Research suggests a relationship between depression and internet addiction<sup>[18]</sup>, indicating that moderate to severe depression often coexists with pathological internet use. Social media, an integral part of daily life, particularly for young adults aged 18-25, offers a platform for communication, self-expression, and information sharing. However, its pervasive use raises concerns about its potential impact on mental health and attitudes towards seeking professional help, such as counselling.

According to a recent report by Smart Insights, the average daily time spent on social media platforms globally is two hours twenty minutes, while 67% of youth uses Instagram, followed by reddit and discord.<sup>[19]</sup> The content mostly consumed with interest by youth consists of comedy, entertainment, sports, beauty and fashion trends, cooking or food.<sup>[20]</sup> These content consumptions have also given rise to professionals, coaches and creators to create content especially on mental health awareness. The count has reached almost 56 million (till date), when only Instagram is searched with the hashtag 'mental health'. Only a handful of empirical studies has been dedicated to the usage of social media in the context of mental health awareness<sup>[21-25]</sup> and help-seeking attitude.<sup>[26-30]</sup> But the influence of social media usage upon help-seeking attitude especially with the youth population has not been given attention. As social media continues to shape the way young people consume content, it also plays a critical role in influencing their attitudes towards mental health and help-seeking

behaviours. Consequently, it becomes essential to investigate how these interactions impact young adults' mental health and their attitudes towards seeking help. Thus, this study aims to examine the relationship between social media usage, attitudes toward seeking professional help, anxiety, and depression among young adults. It explores how social media engagement influences mental health outcomes and individuals' willingness to seek counseling. By understanding these dynamics, the research seeks to provide valuable insights for developing effective mental health interventions and support systems tailored to the needs of this generation.

### Hypotheses

HA1: There is a significant relationship between social media usage and attitudes toward seeking professional help.

HA2: There is a significant relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional help and anxiety.

HA3: There is a significant relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional help and depression.

HA4: There is a significant positive relationship between anxiety and depression.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample for the present correlational research study consisted of 92 young adults, both male and female, aged between 18 and 25 years, from various areas of Kolkata, an urban city. Data were collected in 2021 using a convenience sampling technique. The eligibility criteria included individuals aged 18-25 years who were existing social media users, while those with major psychiatric or neurological conditions were excluded. All Ethical standards were followed in the conduct of the study. Tools used were:

**Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ):** SMEQ measures the amount of time an individual engages in social media while doing their daily activities. It has a reliable composite measure of  $\alpha = .82$  to  $.89$ . [31] The SMEQ is a 5 item-scale, with an 8-point Likert scale ranging from six response keys ranging from one- 'not one day last week' to eight- 'every day last week'. The sum of all the scores gives the total which ranges from a minimum of

8 to 40 maximum, higher scores suggesting increased usage.

**Attitude Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help:** The 10-item attitude toward seeking professional psychological help was used to measure general attitude towards mental health issues. The correlation between the 10-item short form and the original 29-item scale was 0.87.<sup>[32]</sup> A 4-point Likert scale is used in the scale consisting of two key dimensions. The first dimension measured openness to seeking professional help for emotional issues (items 1, 3, 5, 6, and 7), with responses scored from 0 (disagree) to 3 (agree). The second dimension focused on the perceived value and necessity of professional help (items 2, 4, 8, 9, and 10), where the scoring was reversed, meaning 0 indicated agreement and 3 indicated disagreement. The total score of the scale ranges from zero to 30 where higher scores indicate greater help seeking attitudes.

**Beck's Anxiety Inventory (BAI):** The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) is a self-assessment tool consisting of 21 multiple-choice questions aimed at evaluating anxiety levels in individuals aged 17 and above. It is based on a 4-point Likert scale, where the reporter rates how much have s/he been bothered in the past few weeks, ranging from 0 (zero= not at all) to 3 (three = severely). The sum of all the scores gives a total score, with a minimum of zero and maximum of 63. These scores are further categorized into minimal, mild, moderate and severe. This inventory demonstrates robust internal consistency and a notable test-retest reliability ( $r = 0.67$ ). Moreover, the BAI exhibits strong concurrent validity, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.78 to 0.81 when compared with the SCL-90 Anxiety Subscale, the Hamilton Anxiety Scale, and Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI).<sup>[33]</sup>

**Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II)-** The BDI-II is a tool designed to evaluate the intensity, severity, and depth of depressive symptoms. It consists of 21 items, each offering four response options, ranging from 0 to 3, where the reporter rates each item on the basis of how they have been feeling over the past two weeks. The total score can range from zero to 63, where higher scores indicate higher severity of the symptoms. The BDI demonstrates strong construct validity, particularly for medical

symptoms, with an internal consistency coefficient of  $\alpha = 0.92$  for psychiatric outpatients and  $\alpha = 0.93$  for college student populations.<sup>[34]</sup>

**Procedure:** Quantitative method of data collection was used along with a convenience sampling method. Four questionnaires, Social Media Engagement Questionnaire, Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help, Beck's Attitude Inventory and Beck's Depression Inventory were administered followed by a consent form and a general information schedule. As all the scales were self-administering participants were asked to read the instructions carefully and fill it up through online mode with the help of Google Form. Special care was taken to ensure that no item was omitted as that would result in incomplete scoring. The order of presentation of scales were as follows- Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help, Beck's Attitude Inventory, Beck's Depression Inventory and Social Media Engagement Questionnaire. All the questionnaires were provided in English through Google Form. The data collected was scored and tabulated for further statistical treatment and verification of hypotheses.

**Statistical Analysis:** All statistical analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 20 (SPSS - 20). Mean and standard deviations for each of the test parameters were computed. Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient was computed to find out the relationship between attitude towards seeking professional help, and anxiety and depression, and to determine whether a relation exists between the social media usage and attitude towards seeking professional help.

Even though the sampling method chosen was non-probability, the sample depicted normality and thus, a parametric test was used as a statistical tool. This study aims to explore and compare attitudes towards counselling, as well as anxiety and depression, among young adults based on their social media usage. By examining the correlation between social media engagement and mental health outcomes, this research seeks to provide insights into how digital interactions influence young adults' willingness to seek counselling and their overall emotional well-being. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective mental health interventions and support systems tailored to the needs of this generation.

## RESULTS

**Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents**

Socio-Demographic Factors		N (%)
Gender	Female	52 (56.9%)
	Male	40 (43.5%)
Age	18-20 yrs	17 (18.5%)
	21-22 yrs	29 (31.5%)
	23-25 yrs	46 (50%)
Educational level	12 <sup>th</sup> Standard (Completed)	15 (16.3%)
	Graduation (Pursuing/ completed)	43 (46.7%)
	Masters (Pursuing/ Completed)	34 (37%)

**Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation among Variables (n= 92)**

Variables	M ± SD	1	2	3	4
Attitude	16.88 ± 3.98	—			
Anxiety	21.67 ± 13.97	0.390	—		
Depression	13.22 ± 9.19	0.235	0.530**	—	
Social Media Usage	17.22 ± 11.27	- 0.046	0.225*	0.217*	—

The above table represents the computed values of mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and Pearson product moment correlation. It is evident that there is no significant relationship between attitude and social media usage ( $r = -0.046$ ). Thus, the null hypothesis ( $H_{01}$ ) was retained. No significant relationship was observed between attitude and anxiety as well as attitude and depression. Consequently, the null hypotheses ( $H_{02}$  and  $H_{03}$ ) were retained. A significant positive correlation was evident between anxiety and depression ( $r = 0.530$ ). Thus, the alternative hypothesis was accepted, and null was rejected ( $H_{04}$ ).

Interestingly, it has been found out that social media usage and anxiety ( $r = 0.225$ ) as well as social media usage and depression ( $r = 0.217$ ) has a positive significant relationship. Although these variables were not a part of the primary analysis, upon further exploration, a unique pattern came into view which was abductured into the results.

## DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between attitude toward seeking professional help and social media usage along with attitude toward seeking professional help and anxiety and depression. The results of attitude, anxiety and depression indicate a high variance which means the data points are spread out over a large range of values i.e. the data points are very spread out from the mean and from one another. Although the sampling method chosen was non-randomized, it might occur that a diverse range of samples participated in the study. It is more likely that an inaccurate representation of the population took place which led to a slightly different set of values with slightly different sets of means causing the scattering of data. Increase in standard deviation increases standard error which might have affected the results.<sup>[35]</sup>

It can also be elucidated from the above table that the correlation between attitude towards seeking professional help and usage of social media has no significant correlation between them ( $r = -0.046$ ). Research indicates that social media can be an effective tool for spreading awareness about mental health.<sup>[21,23]</sup> Additionally, empirical studies have shown that due to the ease of access and anonymity, young people often prefer to seek help online rather

than from professional sources.<sup>[36,37]</sup> Routine use of social media has also been associated with lower negative attitudes towards seeking help.<sup>[38]</sup> The findings do not show any association between attitude toward seeking professional help and anxiety and depression. The results show that the correlation coefficient of the variables is low, and they have no linear relationship. Time and again, studies have shown that due to the stigma associated with mental illness, a lack of awareness prevails among the sufferers.<sup>[39-41]</sup> This lack of awareness, prevailing stigma, and taboo might have influenced the results. The 'according to psychology' posts on social media, which in reality has no relation to psychology or its theories, have multiplied the amount of self-diagnosis especially among the young adults, which again can pose a barrier in seeking professional help.<sup>[57]</sup>

Interestingly enough, one relationship was found to be significant. A positive correlation was found to exist between anxiety and depression. Earlier research suggests that they are highly comorbid with each other, and together they are considered to belong to the broader category of internalizing disorder.<sup>[42,43]</sup> Consistent findings from comorbidity studies convey that anxiety and depression can coexist.<sup>[44-46]</sup> The mean anxiety level in the present group is 21.67, which falls under the moderate anxiety category. At the same time, the mean depression score is 13.22, constituting the mild category. The anxiety levels in young adults are very usual and is growing rapidly.<sup>[47]</sup> The perception of giving tests might have produced these elevated results, nevertheless, studies have depicted that it does not interfere with their willingness to complete the study.<sup>[48]</sup> The participants represented an urban population, and, preceding studies have delineated that respondents comparatively, display slightly higher anxiety levels.<sup>[49]</sup> Since the scale used was a self-report, it's possible that the participants may have exaggerated their symptoms. This could be due to misattribution of feelings or overreporting. Such biases can distort the accuracy of self-reported data, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine symptoms and over-interpretations by the participants.<sup>[50]</sup>

Two other significant relationships have been found during the further analysis of the variables. Social media usage has a positive



significant relationship with anxiety and depression. Individuals suffering from anxiousness and loneliness tend to exhibit problematic online engagement and frequently turn to social media for social support. This behaviour may function as a compensatory response to the insufficient social support they experience in face-to-face interactions.<sup>[51]</sup> Studies have also shown that teenagers and youth who use social media for longer periods of time tend to depict higher levels of anxiety and depression.<sup>[52-55]</sup> Increased use of social media has decreased the in-person connectivity among one and all, and it's no lie that young adults embody an ardent user. Being a social animal, humans crave connection, and this virtual world has given them a mirage of connectedness when in reality they are lonelier.

In the present study, the results may not have directly indicated a correlation; however, when examined collectively, these constructs do influence one another. A positive attitude towards an object generally predicts corresponding positive behaviour.<sup>[56]</sup> Although no relationship was established between attitudes toward seeking professional help and social media usage, this finding highlights our future focus. Educating the next generation to prioritize their mental health has become imperative. Socio-cultural factors might have played a role in shaping their attitudes.

The million-dollar question remains: Has the stigma and taboo surrounding mental health become so deeply ingrained in our societal roots that, despite youth readily adapting their hairstyles to current trends, they are not similarly changing their attitudes in response to the growing awareness promoted on the same platforms?

### **Limitations**

The study was conducted using an online data collection method via Google Forms, which is subject to biases and confounding factors that may have influenced the results. The reliance on self-reported data could also introduce response biases, impacting the accuracy of the findings.

Additionally, a convenience sampling method was used, resulting in a sample that was diverse in its characteristics but widely dispersed. As a consequence, the collected information may not serve as an accurate representation of the entire

population, limiting the generalizability of the study's conclusions.

Another significant limitation is the potential lack of awareness, realization, and knowledge about the symptoms of mental illness among individuals. This lack of understanding may have influenced the responses, thereby affecting the overall data accuracy and interpretation.

### **Future Scope**

The findings highlight a lack of educational awareness regarding mental health among young adults, emphasizing the need to incorporate mental health education into academic curricula. Integrating mental health awareness programs in schools and colleges could help bridge this gap and foster a more informed perspective.

Future research can further analyze the evolving nature of stigmas and taboos surrounding mental health with a larger and more representative sample. This could provide deeper insights into societal changes and attitudes over time.

Moreover, additional psychological variables such as personality traits, psychological well-being, and burnout can be incorporated into future studies to expand the understanding of mental health dynamics. Examining gender differences in this context can also offer valuable perspectives on how mental health perceptions and experiences vary across different demographics.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the relationship between attitudes toward seeking professional help, social media usage, and anxiety and depression, finding no significant correlation between attitudes toward professional help and either anxiety or depression, nor between these attitudes and social media use. However, it did identify a significant positive correlation between anxiety and depression, aligning with previous research on their comorbidity. The high variance in the data, possibly due to a diverse sample, suggests the need for larger, more representative samples in future research. There is an urgent need to counter the stigma and lack of understanding and information related to mental health. This can be easily done with proper education and vigilance.

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