Problematic Social Media Use and Alienation in Young Adults: Examining the Roles of Emotional Dysregulation and Spiritual Well-Being

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Abstract

An excessive use of social media has been attributed to many problems associated with mental health such as alienation in young adults. This relationship has usually been mediated via emotional dysregulation which further exaggerates the adverse consequences of social media overuse. The concept of spiritual well-being has been suggested as one of the potential moderators of such adverse outcomes. The study investigates how problematic social media usage impacts alienation through emotional dysregulation, with spiritual well-being moderating this relationship. It is grounded in Lazarus's Cognitive Appraisal Theory, which explores the interplay between stress, coping, and emotional responses. This correlational study was conducted with 208 university students aged 18-25, recruited through convenience sampling from public and private institutions. To examine the effects of moderated mediation, conditional process analysis was conducted on Hayes (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 5). The employed scales were Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (Andreassen et al., 2016), Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale Short Form (Kaufman et al., 2016), the Alienation Scale (Dean, 1961) or the FACIT-Sp Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Ahmed et al., 2022). To verify the significance of the indirect effects, the bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used. Findings suggested that emotional dysregulation partially mediated the association between problematic social media usage and alienation. In addition, moderation analysis showed that spiritual well-being was a significant moderator in this relationship. At lower levels of spiritual well-being, the indirect effect of problematic social media usage on alienation through emotional dysregulation was stronger, while at higher levels of spiritual well-being, this effect was weaker. This study underscores the need for integrating spiritual and emotional health into mental health programs, especially in populations with high digital consumption.

Keywords: Alienation, emotional dysregulation, spiritual well-being, problematic social media usage.

Introduction

In recent years, scientific studies on problematic social media usage have increased considerably (Çiçek et al., 2024). The prevalence of excessive social media usage among teenagers and young adults nowadays may be explained by their particular susceptibility to addictive and dangerous behaviors (Musetti et al., 2020). According to the previous studies, problematic social media usage (PSMU) involves uncontrollably strong obsessions, urges, or computer-related behaviors that may lead to impairment or distress and to psychosocial maladjustment, academic problems, and adverse physical health consequences (Beard & Wolf, 2001; Shapira et al., 2003; Young, 1999). This growing concern underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the psychological factors associated with social media addiction and its broader implications (Musetti et al., 2017). This is why the current research

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highlights the connection of problematic social media use, alienation, emotional dysregulation, and spiritual well-being through past and recent studies. There are several reasons behind the increasing reliance on social media. It has evolved into a noticeably better medium for research, entertainment, and communication which has led to a massive increase in its usage. The Internet's accessibility and ability to simplify daily life further reinforce its appeal (Yen et al., 2009). Furthermore, it offers people a secure place to communicate their deepest thoughts and feelings, as well as a way to escape bad emotions (Young, 1999). Nonetheless, the use of social media has been identified to be linked to many psychopathological variables such as depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), social anxiety disorders, sleep disturbances (Starcevic & Khazaal, 2017), problematic parent and adolescent relationships, and problematic behaviors such as alcohol use (Ko et al., 2012). Some other related variables are lack of social support, maladaptive personality traits, control of behaviors and emotions, and deteriorating physically and mentally (Schimmenti et al., 2019).

Robertson et al. (2018) also explain that social media addiction is negatively related to spiritual well-being, psychological resilience, and self-concept, but has a positive relationship with alienation, sadness, anxiety, stress, and loneliness. The psychological concept of alienation has changed remarkably. In the early nineteenth century alienation referred to insanity. However, the term came to signify a person's social isolation and personal disconnection (Kaufmann, 2016). According to Fromm (2008), alienation occurs when a person loses touch with their inner self resulting in a diminished sense of personal authenticity. Cultural norms bind an alienated individual and there is a struggle to escape them through pleasure-seeking activities. The emergence of social media has further intensified feelings of alienation by changing traditional beliefs, behaviors, and ways of thinking. Research suggests that merging virtual and real identities leads to alienation (Tas & Öztosun, 2018). Pathological social media usage may result in false online identities (Çetin & Ceyhan, 2014) fostering social isolation and disengagement. Research confirms the link between negative technology usage and alienation (Babaoğlan et al., 2016), social isolation, and Internet consumption (Poon, 2018).

Emotional dysregulation has been extensively studied in recent years due to its potential to serve as a unifying and cross-diagnostic component for a wide range of psychopathological symptoms (Li et al., 2010). The traditional definition of emotional regulation describes it as the presence and ability to sustain, augment, or diminish behavioral, cognitive, sensory, or physiological components of emotional arousal in accordance with personal and socially acceptable wants and goals (Amendoal et al., 2019). Excessive Internet use has been linked to attempts to escape negative emotions by immersing oneself in an online world (Starcevic & Aboujaoude, 2017). It was found that the more people were addicted to the Internet, the more likely they were to push away feelings and adopt the Internet as a coping instrument to divert dysphoric feelings or at least compensate for earlier or present psychological problems (Fung, 2002). Moreover, significant correlations have been found between emotional dysregulation and problematic social media usage (Tokunaga, 2015).

Spiritual well-being, a moderating factor in the current study, serves as the foundation for mental health interventions, including traditional approaches and contemporary practices

such as acceptance and commitment therapy (Tanhan 2019). Spirituality has two components: one is a person's relationship with a transcendent force (God) or set of principles and the other is, an individual's relationships with others, their surroundings, and oneself (Ross, 1995). The studies have also demonstrated that spiritual well-being is positively associated with extraversion and happiness (Cotton et al., 1999), and negatively associated with mental disorders, including neuroticism, psychoticism, and despair, hopelessness, suicidal thoughts and depression (Bekelman et al., 2007). Deeply spiritual people tend to have an improved psychological state, self-regulation, love, empathy, and the ability to interact with the situations positively (Tanhan & Strack, 2020).

Rationale of the Study

The addictiveness of using social media has been a growing concern over the last few years due to its psychological consequences and the role that it plays in causing alienation (Andreassen et al., 2016). Although the detrimental consequences of high levels of social media use are well reported, few studies are dedicated to the explanation of mechanisms linked to these relationships (Wartberg & Lindenberg, 2020). Emotional dysregulation, characterized by difficulties in managing emotions, may serve as a critical mediator in this relationship (Marino et al., 2018). People with difficulties in emotional regulation might be more susceptible to alienating impacts of unhealthy social media use resulting in an increased level of alienation (Spada & Marino, 2017). Moreover, spiritual well-being (a type of psychological resilience linked to meaning-making and emotional stability) has also been determined as the protective factor that mediates the adverse psychological impacts of overusing social media (Tanhan & Strack, 2020). Based on the cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), where it is stressed that individual coping responses have a strong influence on the regulation of stress, this study examines the extent to which spiritual well-being mediates the correlation between problematic social media use and alienation. To enrich the theoretical scope, the study also conceptually aligns with self-regulation theory (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), which posits that individuals with poor emotional self-control are more susceptible to maladaptive digital behaviours and social withdrawal. This theoretical lens supports the idea that emotional dysregulation serves as a mechanism linking excessive social media use to adverse psychological outcomes. Bbroadening the insights into the consequences of social media addiction, the study analyzes the mediating aspect of emotional dysregulation to describe how problems in governing emotions amplify the degrees of alienation in Internet usage. This study places these psychological constructs together to fill a gap in existing literature that has drawn little attention to how problematic social media use leads to alienation. This is particularly timely given the rise in digital dependency among youth and the corresponding need for holistic mental health frameworks. The results of the present study can guide the interventions focusing on developing emotional regulation skills and spiritual well-being to alleviate the adverse impact of problematic social media usage on mental health.

Hypotheses

H1: Problematic social media usage, emotional dysregulation, and spiritual well-being will have a significant relationship with alienation such that problematic social media usage, and

emotional dysregulation will be positively associated with alienation, while spiritual well-being will be negatively associated with alienation.

H2: The influence of problematic social media usage on alienation will be significantly positive.
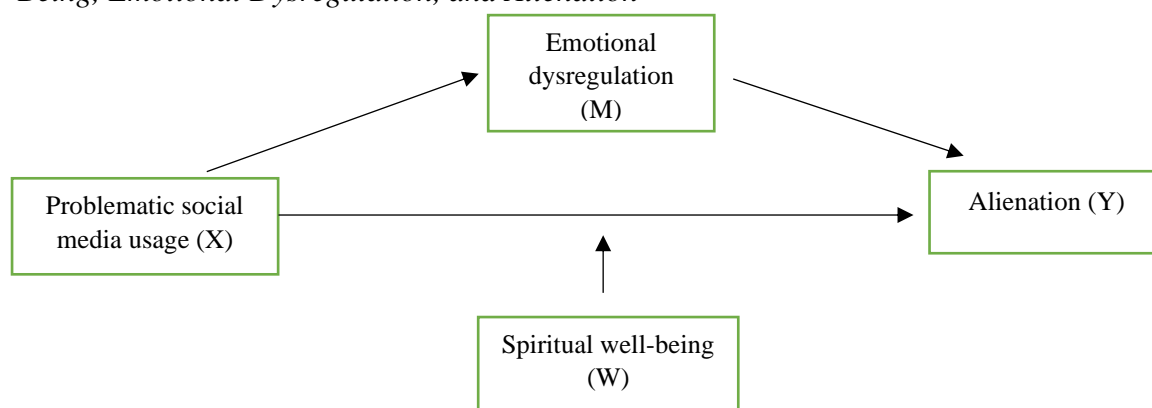
H3: Emotional dysregulation will mediate the effect that problematic social media usage has on alienation.

H4: Spiritual well-being will be a moderator between alienation and problematic social media usage.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1

Proposed Moderated Mediation Model of Problematic Social Media Usage, Spiritual Well-Being, Emotional Dysregulation, and Alienation

Method

Research Design

The study under consideration employs quantitative methodology and correlational research design to determine the influence of problematic social media use on alienation, the moderating role of spiritual well-being, and the mediating role of emotional dysregulation.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

Using structured instruments and a survey technique, data were collected from 208 university students using convenience sampling, from different departments of public and private institutes in Multan. The mean age of the participants was 19.75 years ($S.D = 2.84$), ranging from 16 to 25 years. In terms of gender distribution, 93 participants (44.7%) were male, while 115 participants (55.3%) were female. The sample included students from both public and private institutions, with 56.3% ($n = 117$) belonging to public institutions and 43.8% ($n = 91$) enrolled in private institutions.

Instruments

Spiritual Well-Being (Ahmad et al., 2022)

FACIT-Sp is a 12-item questionnaire developed by Ahmad et al (2022). The scale addresses the well-being of the individual in terms of spirituality with a 5-point Likert scale where 1 denotes, not at all and 5, very much. It measures three important aspects, which are Faith, Meaning, and Peace, with internal consistency values, that show reliability. The Faith factor (4 items) exhibits Cronbach alpha of.87, the Meaning subscale (4 items) has an alpha

of.78, and the Peace subscale (4 items) shows an alpha of.83. The total FACIT-Sp (12 items) is said to have a total scale reliability of.89. The score is considered to be continuous and the higher the score, the greater the levels of spiritual well-being (Ahmed et al., 2022). In the present study, the spiritual well-being scale showed a Cronbach's alpha of .76.

Alienation Scale (Dean, 1961)

The Dean Alienation scale (1961) is a 24-item scale that measures three central aspects of alienation, namely, powerlessness, normlessness, and social isolation. The scale is based on the 5-point Likert scale where the respondents specify their degree of disagreement or agreement (1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree). The adjusted split-half reliability coefficients include .73 for normlessness, .79 for powerlessness, and .84 for social isolation. The total scale reliability is.78, meaning that the reliability of the measurements is guaranteed. Powerlessness has 9 items (Items 2,6, 9, 13, 15, 18, 20, 21 and 23). Normlessness has 6 items (Items 4, 7, 10, 12, 16, and 19) and Social Isolation contains 9 items (Items 1, 3, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 22 and 24). Some of the items (5, 8, 11, 14 and 22) have a reverse scoring. The range of the scores is 0-96 where a high score means higher alienation experienced (Dean, 1961). In the present study, the alienation scale showed a Cronbach's alpha of .90.

Problematic Social Media Usage Scale (Andreassen et al., 2016).

The Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) developed by Andreassen et al. (2016) is used to assess the behaviors of problematic social media use (PSMU) over a current twelve-month period. The scale includes 6 items which are answered on a 5-point Likert scale anchored at 1 (very rarely) to 5 (very often). The total scores lie between 6 to 30, with a higher score indicating PSMU. The reliability of the scale is.88 (Andreassen et al., 2016). In the present study, the problematic social media usage scale showed a Cronbach's alpha of .65. This internal consistency ($\alpha = .65$) does not meet the conventional .70 standard, but it is usually accepted in in social sciences research, where concepts are known to be multi-faceted (Field, 2024).

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale – Short Form (DERS-SF) (Gratz & Roemer, 2004)

The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale Short Form (DERS-SF) is utilized to measure difficulties in emotion regulation (Kaufman et al., 2016). It draws on the original Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) by Gratz and Roemer (2004), which has been a well-established instrument in assessing this construct. Although the full version of the DERS comprises 36 items, the short version has 18 items grouped into six sub scales, each having three items: strategies, non-acceptance, impulse, goals, awareness and clarity. The DERS-SF is a 5-point Likert scale in which the subjects score their answers between 1 (almost never) and 5 (almost always). The sums on each subscale and on the scale as a whole can be determined, and the higher the score, the more difficulties in managing emotions the person demonstrates. The values of Cronbach alpha given to the subscales are the following: Clarity (.78), awareness (.78), strategies (.82), non-acceptance (.85), impulse (.89), goals (.91), and an excellent internal consistency (.89) of the whole scale has been reported (Kaufman et al., 2016). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha of difficulties in emotion regulation scale was .76.

Procedure

For data collection, the researcher approached different departments through personal and professional contacts and asked them to share the study's survey with their students. The body of the survey consists of two sections. The first section includes, a) A summary of the study, b) An informed consent form stating that participation in the survey was fully optional and anonymous, c) A statement stating there were no incentives or perks of any kind, d) A statement that participants can leave the survey if they feel any inconvenience, e) An assurance that the data will only be used for research purposes. The second section contains four well-developed questionnaires to measure the participant's responses along with demographic sheet that contains questions related to gender, age, ethnicity, education, designation, and work experience. The data was analyzed using SPSS software (version 27) and Hayes Process Macro was used for mediation and moderation analysis.

Ethical Considerations

- The study was conducted according to the American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines. All the given procedures were approved by the institutional review board under the number: PSY-569-2024,
- All ethical procedures were adhered to ensure the rights and welfare of the participants. They were made aware that the experience was totally voluntary and anonymous, and they could stop it at any point without any ramifications.
- No personal or identifying information was collected, and no incentives were offered for participation.
- Data were kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes, as approved in the study protocol.

Results

The study results were analyzed using a moderated mediation model (Model 5) through the PROCESS macro. The preliminary analysis included the calculation of Cronbach alpha to determine the reliability of the measurement scales after which correlation analysis was done to check the relationships among the study variables. Then, the mediating role of emotional dysregulation (ED) and the moderating influence of spiritual well-being (SWB) between the problematic social media usage (PSMU) and alienation were investigated using the moderated mediation model. The results are presented below.

Table 1

Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Index and Correlation Matrix of Problematic Social Media Usage, Alienation, Spiritual Well-Being, and Emotional Dysregulation

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Al	48.7	18.34	-			
2. PSMU	16.20	5.26	.74**	-		
3. SW	30.49	8.02	-.37**	-.33**	-	
4. ED	42.78	13.68	.40**	.26**	-.02	-

Note. PSMU = Problematic social media usage; Al = Alienation; ED= Emotional dysregulation; SWB= = Spiritual well-being; $*p < .05$. $**p < .01$. $***p < .001$.

The table provides the correlation matrix, and descriptive data for the variables of the study: alienation, problematic social media usage, spiritual well-being, and emotional dysregulation. The table also shows significant correlations among the variables. Alienation has a positive correlation with PSMU ($r = .74$, $p < .01$) and ED ($r = .40$, $p < .01$), which allows concluding that elevated problematic social media usage and more emotional dysregulation are associated with more significant feelings of alienation. On the other hand, SWB has a negative correlation with Alienation ($r = -.37$, $p < .01$) indicating that the higher the spiritual well-being, the lower the alienation. The inappropriate social media use is also inversely related with SWB ($r = -.33$, $p < .01$) and has a direct relationship with ED ($r = .26$, $p < .01$). But SWB is also not significantly correlated with ED ($r = -.02$, $p > .05$), which suggests that spiritual well-being might not be a direct predictor of emotional dysregulation in this context.

Table 2

Spiritual Well-Being as the Moderator of Direct and Indirect Effects of Problematic Social Media Usage on Alienation through Emotional Dysregulation

Predictors	Moderator	Mediator			Dependent		
		Emotional Dysregulation (ED)			Alienation (Al)		
			95% *CI*			95% *CI*	
	SWB	*B*	LL	UL	*B*	LL	UL
PSMU		.69***	.34	1.03	2.09***	1.76	2.42
ED					.26***	.14	.39
SWB					-.46***	-.68	-.24
PSMU*SWB					-.05**	-.09	-.01
Conditional Direct Effect							
	Low				2.55***	2.12	2.93
	Medium				2.09***	1.76	2.42
	High				1.66***	1.16	2.15
R^2		.29			.63		
F		15.15***			55.53***		
Index of Moderated Mediation					.05	.00	.12

Note. PSMU = Problematic social media usage; Al = Alienation; ED = Emotional dysregulation; SWB= = Spiritual well-being. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.
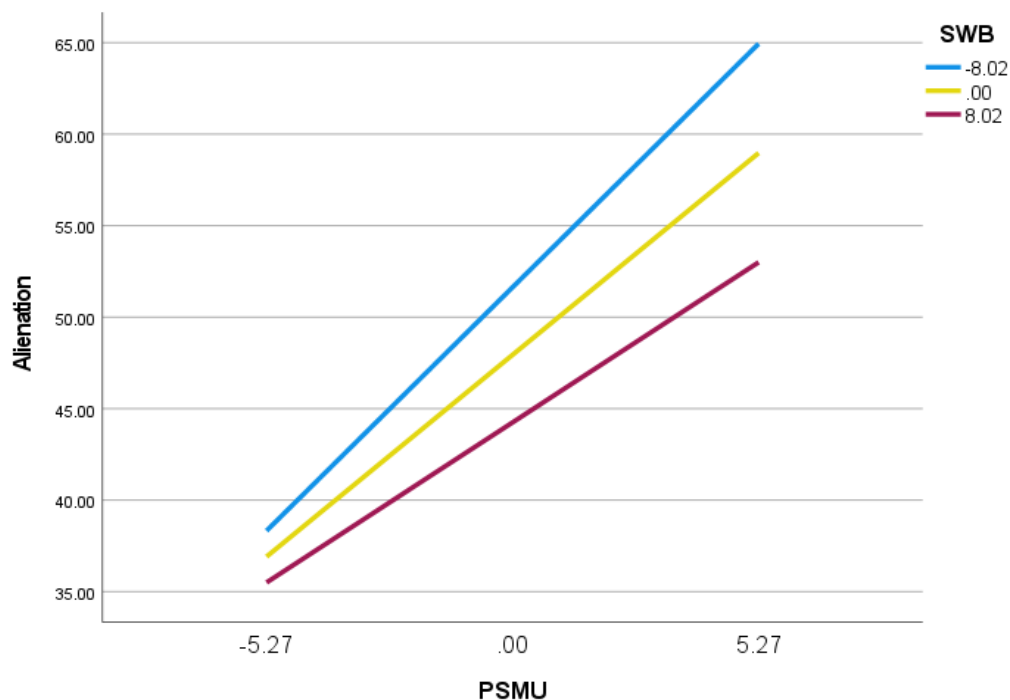
The table shows the findings of the moderated mediation analysis concerning the significance of the moderating role of spiritual well-being (SWB). The results showed that PSMU has direct and indirect effects since it predicts ED ($B = .69$, 95% *CI* [.34, .03], $p < .001$) and Al ($B = 2.09$, 95% *CI* [1.76, 2.42], $p < .001$) significantly. Emotional dysregulation is also an important predictor of Al ($B = .26$, 95% *CI* [.14, .39], p < .001), which indicates its mediating role. Spiritual well-being directly predicts a reduction in alienation ($B = -.46$, 95% *CI* [-.68, -.24], $p < .001$) and moderates the relationship between PSMU and Al, as evidenced by the significant interaction term (PSMU $\times$ SWB: $B = -.05$, 95% *CI* [-.09, -.01], $p < .01$). The conditional direct effects indicate that the influence of PSMU on Al decreases as levels

of SWB increase, with stronger effects at low levels of SWB ($B = 2.55$, 95% CI [2.12, 2.93], $p < .001$) compared to medium ($B = 2.09$, 95% CI [1.76, 2.42], $p < .001$) and high levels of SWB ($B = 1.66$, 95% CI [1.16, 2.15], $p < .001$).

In general, the model accounts for 29% of the variation in ED ($R^2 = .29$, $F = 15.15$, p $< .001$) and 63% of the variation in Al ($R^2 = .63$, $F = 55.53$, $p < .001$). The moderated mediation index (.05, 95% CI [.00, .12]), provides support to the moderating effect of SWB on the indirect relationship between PSMU and Al through ED. Although the confidence interval covers zero [.00, .12], but the-p- value is at the conventional significance level ($p = .05$). As explained by Hayes (2018), a CI hitting zero in a moderated mediation analysis could mean there is a marginal effect, mainly when the model is relatively complex. Thus, these findings support the possible protective effect of spiritual well-being, which decreases the linkage between problematic social media use and alienation.

Figure 2

Figure illustrating Moderating Role of Spiritual Well-Being on the Association Between Problematic Social Media Usage and Alienation

The graph shows three regression lines corresponding to low (-8.02), moderate (0.00), and high (+8.02) levels of SWB. The interaction between PSMU and SWB is significant. As PSMU increases, alienation also increases, but the strength of this relationship diminishes with higher levels of SWB. This indicates that SWB buffers the negative effects of PSMU on alienation.

Discussion

The primary aim of the present study was to explore the connection between problematic social media use and alienation mediated by emotional dysregulation and moderated by spiritual well-being. The first hypothesis focused on the links between problematic social media and alienation, emotional dysregulation, and spiritual well-being.

The findings of the first hypothesis revealed high positive correlation of alienation, problematic social media usage, and emotional dysregulation. These results are in line with those of Li et al. (2010) who noted that alienation and its sub-factors, including social exclusion and isolation, are linked to social media addiction. There is further evidence that there is positive correlation between social isolation and use of Internet daily (Musetti et al., 2020). These results point out that pathological use of social media undermines stability in people, hinders their capacity to regulate their emotions, and results in feelings of isolation. This is consistent with Shapira et al. (2000) who observed that instability arising from excessive use of the internet affects self-regulation as well as leads to social isolation. Moreover, studies indicate that spiritual well-being lessens these consequences. Higher levels of spiritual well-being have been shown to improve psychological functioning and lessen alienation (McClain et al., 2003; Tanhan, 2019). Nam et al. (2018) emphasized that poor psychological functioning caused by Internet addiction adds to alienation, which supports Fromm's (2008) view of psychological problems and alienation. Moreover, it has been discovered that there is an inverse correlation between mental illness, such as depression (Bekelman et al., 2007; Fehring et al., 1987), neurosis, and violence, and spiritual well-being (Unterrainer et al., 2010). The results of the current research also highlighted the buffering influence of spiritual well-being which lowers the challenges and negative consequences of problematic Internet use on alienation.

The second hypothesis that was being tested was that emotional dysregulation mediated the relationship between problematic social media use and alienation. Findings of the second hypothesis revealed that a significant positive relationship existed between alienation and problematic social media usage. These observations are consistent with the conclusions of Amendoal et al. (2019) who found that emotional control exacerbates experience of pathological Internet use. More evidence indicates that dysfunctional emotion regulation systems are substantially linked to the recurrent prevalence of pathological use of the Internet particularly among young adults (Casale et al., 2016; Musetti et al., 2018). Furthermore, potentially pathological activities on the Internet can manifest themselves as forms of self-compensatory activities for persons with impaired emotional regulation. This is in agreement with the observations of Spada and Marino (2017) stating that such activities enable occupational diversion to avoid feelings of depression and anxiety, an escape from reality. Liu and Ma (2019) discovered that self-regulation and problematic social media usage are closely connected, thereby confirming the mediating effect of emotional dysregulation in the specified study. The third hypothesis under investigation examined the moderating role of spiritual well-being between problematic social media usage and feelings of alienation.

Results from the third hypothesis showed a substantial negative correlation between problematic social media usage and alienation. Even though the result is statistically significant, it does not exceed the most accepted standard because zero is in the confidence interval. Even so, considering that the p-value is exactly .05 and the lower bound is close to the line of significance, this finding points out a marginal trend that could be explored further, especially in cross-sectional research with a larger sample (Hayes, 2018). The results of the current research correspond to Tanhan and Strack's study (2020) who discovered that spiritual well-being decreases psychological isolation by promoting interpersonal integration, personal growth, and psychological coping, maintaining optimal functionality. Additional

evidence indicates that spiritual well-being moderates the negative psychological outcomes of pathological internet use, existential depression, impatience, mood swings, and mental distress by fostering meaning (Wartberg & Lindenberg, 2020). Çevik et al. (2020) found a distinctive negative correlation between the level of smartphone addiction and meaningful life, thereby demonstrating how spiritual well-being shields against alienation

Conclusion

The results demonstrate how unhealthy social media usage affects human emotions and loneliness yet spiritual health serves as a protection against these impacts. This research enhances the understanding of digital well-being and supports the development of interventions to strengthen both emotional and spiritual resilience in an era of growing online connectivity. To sum up, the results support the hypothesis that the effects of problematic social media use on alienation are reduced by spiritual well-being and show the important role of emotional dysregulation as the mediator between the two variables. Spiritual health and emotional coping skills should be encouraged in order to mitigate psychological and social impact of problematic social media consumption.

Limitations and Suggestions

The study's cross-sectional research approach limits potential conclusions about cause and effect so future analysis should track relationships across time. Future research requires the utilization of objective behavioral data through social media activity tracking to verify self-reported data since these measures can lead to response biases. General conclusions about other age groups remain limited since most study participants are young adults. Research should examine if demographic factors along with cultural backgrounds affect the discovery of analogous patterns.

Since the study used convenient sampling, the findings might not be widely generalized. Future researchers should apply probability-based sampling to ensure that the sample represents the broader population. Another shortcoming of the study is that one of the scales does not meet the conventional standard of Cronbach's alpha reliability index, but it is usually accepted in social sciences research, where concepts are known to be multi-faceted (Field, 2024). Future researches are suggested to replicate this study using scales with high internal consistency. Finally, the moderated mediation effect seems to be borderline significant as the p-value is equal to .05; the evidence suggests that the effect is not very reliable. Future research could confirm this marginal effect with more precision especially in cross-sectional research with a larger sample and better statistical methods.

Implications

The study presents significant theoretical findings by demonstrating how problematic social media use in digital contexts is exacerbated by inadequate emotional regulation utilizing Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal paradigm. Greater spiritual well-being functions as a protective factor because people who maintain elevated spiritual well-being demonstrate superior abilities to handle online environments. Applied research indicates the necessity to create interventions that teach emotional regulation techniques and promote spiritual well-being since both elements protect against social media-based negative

effects. To increase psychological resilience in those who are prone to digital behavioral issues, mental health practitioners, educators, and legislators should design programs that teach mindfulness in addition to emotional regulation and spiritual development strategies.

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