

Original Research Article

Impact of social media on the psychological well-being of adolescents and young adults in Delhi

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Received: 13 July 2026

Revised: 08 September 2026

Accepted: 10 September 2026

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ABSTRACT

Background: Social media has become an integral part of the daily life of adolescents and young adults. With access to smartphones and social media beginning at younger ages, there are concerns regarding their potential impact on psychological well-being and cognitive functioning. However, evidence from an urban Indian setting remains limited. This study aimed to assess the distribution of psychological distress and examine its association with smartphone use, social media engagement, and cognitive failure among individuals aged 15-25 years in Delhi.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among 50 participants selected through purposive sampling. Digital media behaviour was assessed using a semi-structured proforma, while cognitive failure and psychological distress were evaluated using standardised and validated questionnaires. Oral and informed written consent were obtained before data collection.

Results: Anxiety was the most common form of psychological distress. Two-thirds of participants reported extreme anxiety. Both early smartphone ownership (<16 years) and early social media adoption (<15 years) showed statistically significant association with higher psychological distress across all domains ($p < 0.01-0.001$). Those who reported more than five hours of daily usage on social media were more in an extreme psychological distress state. Higher cognitive failure was significantly associated with severe psychological distress, while greater social media usage correlated with increased cognitive impairment.

Conclusions: These findings highlighted the importance of age-appropriate digital media practices and effective screen time regulation to protect the psychological well-being of youth.

Keywords: Adolescent and young adults, Cognitive failure, Delhi, Psychological well-being, Screen time, Social media

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms serve as an interactive digital space where users communicate, share material and selectively construct their public or private identity.¹ Social media has become an indispensable part of adolescents' and young adults' daily lives worldwide.² As per the Pew Research Centre, 95% of adolescents aged 13-17 years use at least one social media platform, and more than one-third reported using these platforms "almost constantly".³ Instagram is one of the world's

most influential social media platforms, with 3 billion active users worldwide.⁴ India has its largest user base with approximately 481 million users, where the majority belong to the 18-24 age group.³

Psychological distress is a state of emotional suffering characterised by symptoms of anxiety (which may involve panic or excessive worry and depression (which may involve persistent sadness or a loss of interest, including persistent irritability, sleep disturbance and impaired daily functioning.⁵⁻⁷ According to the World

Health Organisation (WHO), 50% of all mental health conditions begin before the age of 14 years and 75% before the age of 24 years.⁸ 1 in 7 adolescents aged 10-19 years live with a mental health condition.⁹ It is estimated that 4.1% of 10-14-year-olds and 5.3% of 15-19-year-olds experience an anxiety disorder.⁹ Depression is estimated to occur among 1.3% of adolescents aged 10-14 years, and 3.4% of 15-19-year-olds.⁹

The increasing use of social media among youth has raised concerns about its impact. Social media is a double-edged sword it has a positive impact as it allows users to stay connected with their loved ones, self-expression, and access to peer support, but its excessive usage is linked with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress.¹⁰⁻¹⁶ Excessive usage of social media leads to individual factors such as Fear of missing out (FOMO), social comparison, cyberbullying, and exposure to unrealistic lifestyle and body image standards, which may further contribute to poor mental health outcomes.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Prolonged and late-night usage can disrupt sleep and emotional regulation and negatively affect academic performance and overall well-being.²⁰⁻²² Excessive social media usage may lead to cognitive failure, such as forgetfulness and poor concentration.²³ Due to information overload, users find it difficult to maintain focus and attention while performing daily task.^{24,25}

Community-based studies from urban Indian settings remain limited majority of the literature focuses on either psychological distress or screen time alone, while fewer studies have examined the combined relationship between digital media engagement, cognitive failure and psychological well-being among youth.

The present study aimed to assess the distribution of psychological distress and examine its association with age at first smartphone ownership, age at social media adoption, daily social media usage, and cognitive failure among youth of Delhi. By understanding these associations, we may identify vulnerable groups and contribute to the development of effective interventions promoting healthy digital media practices and improving psychological well-being among youth.

METHODS

A cross-sectional study was conducted among adolescents and young adults residing in urban areas of north-east Delhi over 12 days of fieldwork from 15 April 2026 to 26, April, 2026, India. To examine the association between digital media engagement, cognitive failure, and psychological distress. The study included 50 participants aged 15-25 years (26 adolescents aged 15-19 years; young adults 24 aged 20-25 years: 24) selected through purposive sampling. Individuals who had been residing in Delhi since birth and were regular users of

smartphones and social media for at least 6 months were eligible for participation. Participants aged 15-25 years who provided informed consent (and parental consent with participant assent for those below 18 years) were included in the study. Individuals with severe psychiatric disorders, neurological conditions, or cognitive impairment, which could impact responses, were excluded.

Data was collected using a semi-structured interview schedule that recoded socio-demographic characteristics. Psychological distress was assessed using the depression anxiety stress scale-21 (DASS-21), a validated instrument comprising 21 items distributed across three domains: depression, anxiety, and stress.²⁶ Participants were classified into three categories for statistical analysis; the normal and mild categories were combined as normal, while the severe and extremely severe categories merged as the extreme distress category and moderate category. Cognitive functioning was assessed using the cognitive failures questionnaire (CFQ) used to evaluate everyday lapses in memory, attention, perception and action.²⁷ The participants were classified into low, moderate, and high cognitive failure categories according to the standard classification. Digital media engagement was assessed through a semi-structured proforma that recorded age at first smartphone ownership, age at social media adoption, and daily screen time with help of smartphone built in app which is Digital wellbeing.

The purpose of the study was explained to the participants in their local language. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their data and their right to withdraw from the study at any point in time. Data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. The distribution of age at first smartphone ownership and age at social media adoption were approximately normally distributed; the sample mean values were used as a cut-off point for categorization. Accordingly, participants were grouped as under or above 16 years of age at smartphone adoption, and under or over 15 years of age at social media adoption. Daily social media use was categorized as under and over 5 hours per day. The association between psychological distress, digital media engagement variables, and cognitive failure were examined using Fisher's exact test. This test was employed because the sample size is relatively small. and the presence of cells with low expected frequencies. A p value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Figure 1 presents the distribution of psychological distress among the studied population. Anxiety was the most severely affected domain, with every 2 out of 3 participants reporting an extreme level. Depression and stress show balanced distribution, with the majority falling under normal and moderate distress.

Table 1: Association of psychological distress with age at first time smartphone owned/usage.

Severity	Severity	Age at which smartphone was owned/ usage started % (N)		Fisher's exact test
		<16 years	>16 years	
Stress	Normal	0 (0)	100 (19)	27.62***
	Moderate	69.2 (9)	30.8 (4)	
	Extreme	72.2 (13)	27.8 (5)	
Anxiety	Normal	10 (1)	90 (9)	10.69**
	Moderate	14.3 (1)	85.7 (6)	
	Extreme	60.6 (20)	39.4 (13)	
Depression	Normal	22.7 (5)	77.3 (17)	10.20**
	Moderate	41.7 (5)	58.3 (7)	
	Extreme	75 (12)	25 (4)	

P<0.01**, p<0.001***.

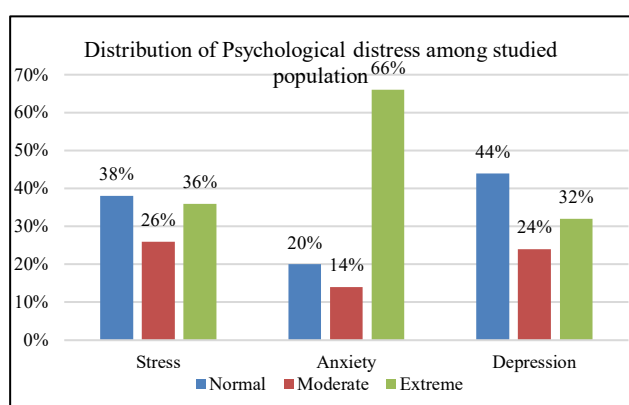
**Figure 1: Distribution of psychological distress among the studied population.**

Table 1 present the association between the age at which participant start using smartphone and the severity of psychological distress. A statistically significant association was observed across all three domains. Individuals who began using smartphones before 16 years

of age were more likely to report higher severity of stress, anxiety and depression compared to those who started later. Stress showed the strongest association, followed by anxiety and depression, respectively.

Table 2 examines the association between the age at which individuals joined social media and psychological distress. Those who joined after 15 years of age were predominantly found in the normal distress categories compared to those who started using it early, who showed higher severity of stress, anxiety, and depression. The findings were statistically significant across all three domains, with the strongest association observed for stress and depression.

Table 3 examines the association of daily social media usage and psychological distress. In the studied population, lower social media usage (under 5 hours) showed a significant association with normal psychological distress across all three domains. While two-thirds of individuals who use social media more than 5-hour lie in the extreme psychological distress group.

Table 2: Association of age at which the social media platform account was created with psychological distress.

Domains	Categories	Age at joining social media % (N)		Fisher's exact test
		<15 years	>15 years	
Stress	Normal	15.8 (3)	84.2 (16)	22.23***
	Moderate	46.2 (6)	53.8 (7)	
	Extreme	88.9 (16)	11.1 (2)	
Anxiety	Normal	10 (1)	90 (9)	12.43**
	Moderate	28.6 (2)	71.4 (5)	
	Extreme	66.7 (16)	33.3 (11)	
Depression	Normal	18.2 (4)	81.8 (18)	16.74****
	Moderate	66.7 (8)	33.3 (4)	
	Extreme	81.2 (13)	18.8 (3)	

P<0.01**, p<0.001***.

Table 3: Association of screen time with psychological distress among studied population.

Domains	Severity	Time spends on social media % (N)		Fisher's exact test
		<5 hours	>5 hours	
Stress	Normal	63.2 (12)	36.8 (7)	8.04*
	Moderate	30.8 (4)	69.2 (9)	
	Extreme	17.6 (3)	82.4 (14)	
Anxiety	Normal	80 (8)	20 (2)	20.58***
	Moderate	85.7 (6)	14.3 (1)	
	Extreme	15.6 (5)	84.4 (27)	
Depression	Normal	59.1 (13)	40.9 (9)	6.70*
	Moderate	18.2 (2)	81.8 (9)	
	Extreme	25 (4)	75 (12)	

P<0.05*, p<0.001***.

Table 4: Association of time spent on social media with psychological distress among studied population.

Domains	Severity	Time spent on social media % (N)			Fisher's exact test
		Low	Mild	High	
Stress	Normal	57.9 (11)	31.6 (6)	10.5 (2)	14.59**
	Moderate	15.4 (2)	23.1	61.5 (8)	
	Extreme	11.1 (2)	44.4 (8)	44.8 (8)	
Anxiety	Normal	37.5 (3)	50 (4)	12.5 (1)	14.70***
	Moderate	71.4 (5)	14.3 (2)	14.3 (1)	
	Extreme	12.1 (4)	39.4 (13)	48.5 (16)	
Depression	Normal	59.1 (13)	18.2 (4)	22.7 (5)	19.90***
	Moderate	16.7 (2)	58.3 (7)	25 (3)	
	Extreme	0 (0)	37.5 (6)	62.5 (10)	

P<0.01**, p<0.001***.

Table 5: Association of psychological distress with cognitive failure among studied population.

Domains	Severity	Cognitive Failure % (N)			Fishers exact test
		Low	Moderate	High	
Stress	Normal	57.8 (11)	21.1 (4)	21.1 (4)	11.613**
	Moderate	15.4 (2)	53.8 (7)	30.8 (4)	
	Extreme	11.1 (2)	38.9 (7)	50 (9)	
Anxiety	Normal	60 (6)	20 (2)	20 (2)	11.928**
	Moderate	57.1 (4)	42.9 (3)	0 (0)	
	Extreme	15.1 (5)	39.4 (13)	45.5 (15)	
Depression	Normal	54.5 (12)	27.3 (6)	18.2 (4)	11.456**
	Moderate	8.3 (1)	50 (6)	41.7 (5)	
	Extreme	12.5 (2)	37.5 (6)	50 (8)	

P<0.01**.

Table 4 presents the relationship between daily social media usage and psychological distress. Participants with low usage are more under the normal distress category, while those with high usage are concentrated in the extreme distress category. In depression, 62.5% of high usage participants reported an extreme level of depression. These results indicate a statistically significant association between higher usage intensity and increased distress severity across all domains.

Table 5 examines the association between cognitive failure and the severity of psychological distress. Participants with low cognitive failure were found in the normal distress group, while those who were experiencing high cognitive failure were concentrated in the extreme distress group. These findings indicate that higher levels of cognitive failure are associated with increased psychological distress severity across all three domains.

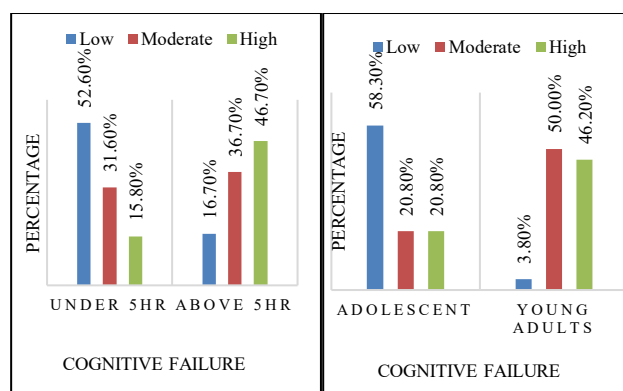


Figure 2: Association of cognitive failure with social media usage and age among the studied population.

Figure 2 presents the social media and age association with cognitive failure. Higher social media (>5 hours/day) usage is significantly associated with high cognitive failure. There is also a significant association observed between age and cognitive status. 58.3% of adolescents reported low cognitive failure, while young adults showed higher impairment, with 46.2% categorized under high cognitive failure.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the impact of digital media engagement on the psychological well-being of youth in Delhi. The study shows significant psychological distress among the study population. The finding indicates that anxiety was the most affected domain, with two-thirds of the participants reporting extreme anxiety. This is consistent with the study conducted in Delhi, where 52% of participants were in moderate to severe anxiety.²⁸ This high level of anxiety distribution may be related to social media visual nature, which constantly exposes users to idealised lifestyles, beauty standards, and social validation through features such as likes and followers. These features can encourage social comparison and fear of missing out (FOMO), making young individuals more vulnerable to emotional distress. This high prevalence of anxiety may be due to platforms like Instagram as in this study all participants are its users. According to Masri-Zada et al when users keep trying to evaluate self-worth with features such as likes, followers, and comments, it triggers an acute loop of excessive reassurance seeking behaviour (ERSB).²⁹ Similar observations have been reported by a study conducted in Pune, India, which found that frequent usage of Instagram and lifestyle-centric curated content leads to elevated anxiety because of social comparison and FOMO.¹⁵

A significant association was observed between the age at which smartphones and social media platforms were first used and the severity of psychological distress. Those who started using smartphones before the age of 16 years and created social media accounts before the age of 15

years among the studied population were more likely to experience severe stress, anxiety, and depression. Adolescence represents a critical period of emotional and cognitive development, and early exposure to digital media may prolong the duration of social media engagement and increase vulnerability to online stressors.¹⁴ In a study conducted in Morocco, a negative correlation between the age of onset of social media use and problematic social media use was observed. This shows that social media usage during the early adolescence period acts as a catalyst in manifesting psychological distress earlier and more severe in later life.³⁰

Participants spending more than five hours daily on social media were predominantly represented in the extreme categories of stress, anxiety, and depression, whereas lower usage was associated with a relatively normal psychological status. Excessive engagement with social media often occurs at the expense of sleep, physical activity, and face-to-face interactions, which are essential for emotional well-being.^{20,31,32} In addition, constant exposure to idealised content may contribute to dissatisfaction and emotional exhaustion. A study by Calvert et al found that a one-week social media detox led to an approximate 25% drop in depression symptoms, alongside a 15% reduction in both anxiety.³³

In the present study, individuals with low cognitive failure scores were mainly represented in the normal categories of stress, anxiety, and depression, whereas those with high cognitive failure experienced more severe distress categories. Persistent emotional disturbances are known to deplete attentional resources and impair memory and concentration, making it harder for individuals to manage even routine daily tasks.³⁴ When the mind is constantly preoccupied with anxiety or low mood, cognitive slippages such as forgetting, losing focus, or making errors in judgment become more frequent and disruptive.³⁵ This relationship has been demonstrated by Zhang et al, who found that mobile phone addiction contributes to depression, anxiety, and stress through the mediating role of cognitive failure, suggesting that problematic digital engagement does not merely affect emotional health but also quietly erodes everyday cognitive functioning.³⁶ Similar observations have been reported in a cross-sectional study among medical students, which found that elevated levels of stress and anxiety were significantly associated with a higher frequency of cognitive failures.³⁷

Social media usage duration showed a significant relationship with cognitive functioning, with participants reporting more than five hours of daily screen exposure exhibiting higher cognitive failure. Continuous media multitasking and excessive digital engagement may overload attentional resources, resulting in impaired concentration and memory. In studies conducted by Naik et al and Aljadani et al demonstrates that excessive engagement with short-form video platforms significantly

impairs executive functioning and working memory.^{38,39} Age also showed a significant association with cognitive function, where young adults exhibited greater cognitive impairment compared to adolescents, consistent with Yousef et al and Arouch et al, who suggest that young adults face unique vulnerabilities to cognitive overload and attentional disruption due to higher baseline executive functioning demands.^{24,40} The present study adds to the limited evidence from urban India by examining the relationship between digital media engagement, cognitive failure, and psychological distress among youth. Although the study was based on a small purposive sample from north-east Delhi and a cross-sectional design, it provides valuable preliminary insights into the impact of digital media behaviours on youth well-being. Future studies should use longitudinal designs with larger and more diverse samples to strengthen the validity and generalisability of these findings.

CONCLUSION

Early smartphone ownership, early social media adoption, and prolonged social media use were significantly associated with higher psychological distress and cognitive failure among youth. The findings suggest that both the timing and intensity of digital media engagement may influence psychological well-being and cognitive functioning. These findings highlight the need for importance of promoting healthy and age-appropriate digital media practices to support youth well-being in an increasingly digital environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, for providing the necessary academic support and facilities to conduct this study. We also thank all the participants for their valuable time and cooperation.

Funding: No funding sources

Conflict of interest: None declared

Ethical approval: Not required

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Cite this article as: Kumar K, Dhall M. Impact of social media on the psychological well-being of adolescents and young adults in Delhi. *Int J Community Med Public Health* 2026;13:5866-72.