

IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING ON PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS: EXPORING THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF COPING AND RUMINATION

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Abstract: Social networking addiction, coping, rumination, and psychological distress are important factors influencing young adult's mental health. Social networking addiction reflects excessive and uncontrolled use of social media, coping refers to strategies used to manage stress, rumination is the repetitive focus on distressing thoughts, and psychological distress includes symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. This study examined the relationship among these variables, focusing on whether coping and rumination mediate the link between social networking addiction and psychological distress. A quantitative survey design was adopted, and data were collected from 204 young adults selected through purposive and convenience sampling. Standardized psychological measures were employed, including the Social Networking Addiction Scale by Shahnawaz and Rehman to assess problematic online use, the Brief COPE Inventory by Carver to evaluate coping strategies, the Rumination Responses Scale by Treynor to measure ruminative thinking patterns, and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 by Lovibond and Lovibond to assess psychological distress. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analyses were conducted using SPSS. Findings indicated that the overall regression model was significant. Rumination significantly predicted psychological distress, whereas social networking addiction and coping strategies did not. These results highlight rumination's central role in linking social networking addiction to negative mental health outcomes. Limitations include the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reports.

Keywords: Social networking, coping, rumination, psychological distress, young adults.

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, social networking platforms have become an integral part of everyday life, profoundly influencing how individuals connect, communicate, and construct their identities. Sites such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have transformed interpersonal relationships and self-presentation practices by enabling instant interaction and feedback across global boundaries (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). These platforms are particularly popular among adolescents and young adults, who use them to seek validation, express emotions, and establish social belonging. While such engagement offers benefits including social connectedness, creative expression, and access to information, a growing body of literature highlights the darker psychological consequences of excessive and compulsive social networking use (Andreassen et al., 2017; Huang, 2020). The concept of problematic social networking use has been understood through behavioral

addiction frameworks that describe symptoms such as preoccupation, withdrawal, mood modification, tolerance, and relapse (Griffiths, 2005). Continuous exposure to algorithmically curated content and metrics such as “likes” or “follower counts” fosters a cycle of comparison and emotional dependency (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Consequently, users may develop cognitive vulnerabilities that increase emotional dysregulation, loneliness, and psychological distress. Empirical studies have linked problematic social media use to higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among young adults (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020; Du et al., 2024). Psychological distress refers to a multidimensional experience of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms such as sadness, tension, and nervousness, which may range from transient discomfort to clinically significant dysfunction (Mirowsky & Ross, 2002; Drapeau, Marchand, & Beaulieu-Prévost, 2012). Although not a psychiatric diagnosis, psychological distress is a crucial indicator of mental well-being and a strong predictor of depression and anxiety disorders (Kessler et al., 2002). It is often triggered or exacerbated by cognitive and emotional processes that interfere with adaptive functioning. Among these, rumination and coping strategies have been identified as key mediators linking stressors such as social media exposure to negative mental health outcomes (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010). Rumination is a maladaptive cognitive process involving repetitive and passive focus on distressing thoughts, often without resolution (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Within digital environments, users frequently encounter idealized portrayals of others’ lives, which may elicit self-comparison and trigger ruminative thought cycles (Feinstein et al., 2013; Vogel et al., 2014). Over time, this can lead to feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, and heightened psychological distress. Studies have shown that rumination mediates the relationship between problematic social media use and emotional symptoms, illustrating how cognitive processing intensifies digital stress (Fioravanti et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022). In contrast, coping strategies refer to cognitive and behavioral responses aimed at managing internal or external stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Adaptive coping, including planning and seeking support, can mitigate the emotional burden of online stress, whereas maladaptive coping—such as avoidance or self-blame—tends to amplify distress (Carver et al., 1989; Taylor & Stanton, 2007). In digital contexts, coping may take novel forms: for instance, using social media to seek reassurance can either relieve or reinforce negative emotions depending on the user’s mindset and rumination tendencies (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). Thus, the mental health impact of social networking cannot be explained solely by time spent online but must be understood through cognitive and emotional mechanisms that shape individual responses. Excessive or maladaptive social networking fosters an environment conducive to ruminative thinking and ineffective coping, both of which escalate psychological distress. The present study seeks to examine the impact of social networking addiction on psychological distress among young adults, with a particular focus on the mediating roles of coping and rumination. By identifying these cognitive pathways, this research contributes to understanding how digital engagement translates into emotional outcomes and how targeted interventions can promote healthier social media use.

II. NEED OF THE STUDY

In today’s digital era, social networking platforms have become a major part of young adults’ lives, influencing their thoughts, emotions, and behavior. While these platforms provide opportunities for social connection and self-expression, excessive or uncontrolled use can lead to negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and stress. There is a growing need to understand not just how much time individuals spend on social media, but how cognitive and emotional processes like rumination and coping strategies shape the link between social networking and psychological distress. This study is significant because it explores these mediating mechanisms to explain why some individuals experience distress while others do not, despite similar social media exposure. By identifying rumination as a key cognitive factor and coping as a behavioral response, the research provides deeper insight into the psychological pathways leading to distress. It bridges theoretical models such as the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and the Response Styles Theory, extending them into the digital context. The findings have practical value for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers by guiding interventions that promote adaptive coping, mindfulness, and digital well-being. The study emphasizes the importance of teaching healthy online engagement and emotion regulation among young adults. Thus, it contributes both to theoretical understanding and to developing preventive strategies that enhance mental health in the age of social networking.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Aim

To examine the impact of social networking on psychological distress and to explore the mediating roles of coping and rumination.

3.2 Objectives

1. To assess the relationship between social networking and psychological distress.
2. To determine the mediating role of coping in the relationship between social networking and psychological distress.
3. To examine the mediating role of rumination in the relationship between social networking and psychological distress.
4. To analyze whether coping and rumination together provide a stronger explanatory model for the link between social networking and psychological distress.

3.3 Hypotheses

H₁ 1: Social networking addiction is associated with psychological distress.

H₁ 2: Coping will mediate the relationship between social networking addiction and psychological distress.

H₁ 3: Rumination will mediate the relationship between social networking addiction and psychological distress.

H₁ 4: Coping and rumination together will significantly mediate the relationship between social networking addiction and psychological distress.

3.4 Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative method to assess these social networking addiction, coping strategies, rumination, and psychological distress.

3.5 Research Method

The survey method was used for data collection. Standardized self-report questionnaires were distributed to participants in both online and offline formats. This method was chosen as it allows for efficient collection of data from a large sample, ensures participant anonymity, and provides reliable responses for statistical analysis.

3.6 Sample

The study comprised of 204 participants which includes 100 male and 104 female, selected through purposive sampling. Population: Young adults who actively engage in social networking.

3.7 Tool Description

1. Social Networking Addiction Scale (Shahnawaz & Rehman, 2020) 20-item instrument developed to assess problematic tendencies toward social networking addiction. It covers behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects of excessive social networking use.
2. Brief COPE Inventory (Carver, 1989) 28-item scale measuring coping responses across 14 strategies (e.g., active coping, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, denial, substance use, self-blame). Classified into adaptive coping (problem-focused and emotion-focused) and maladaptive coping.
3. Ruminative Responses Scale (Treynor et al., 2003) 22-item instrument assessing repetitive negative thinking patterns. Two dimensions – Brooding (maladaptive reflection on distress) and Reflection (purposeful problem-focused rumination).

4. Depression Anxiety Stress Scale–21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) 21-item scale measuring symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Contains 3 subscales with 7 items each – Depression, Anxiety, and Stress.

3.8 Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained prior to the study. Participants were recruited through online platforms and offline settings. The purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and confidentiality were explained, and informed consent was obtained. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure participants met the study requirements. Participants completed standardized self-report questionnaires on social networking addiction, coping, rumination, and psychological distress (approx. 20–25 minutes). Clear instructions were provided to ensure uniform understanding of all items. Responses were screened for completeness, and participants with substantial missing data were excluded. Data were coded and entered into SPSS for analysis. Preliminary checks for normality, missing data, and outliers were conducted before statistical analyses. Data were securely stored and anonymized to maintain participant confidentiality.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

- Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board.
- Informed consent was obtained before participation.
- Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation.
- They were informed about their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences.
- Data was used strictly for academic and research purposes.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result of Descriptive Statics

Table 4.1 Descriptive table

Variable	N	M	SD
Social Networking	204	2.08	0.95
Rumination	204	0.92	0.56
Coping	204	1.72	0.50
Psychological Distress	204	1.70	1.16

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation

4.2 Result of Multiple statics

Table 4.2 Multiple Regressions

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.454	0.303	-	1.499	.135
Social Networking	0.085	0.085	.069	0.998	.319

Rumination	0.650	0.144	.314	4.512	.000
Coping	0.271	0.156	.116	1.737	.084

Note: Dependent variable = Psychological Distress. $R = .385$, $R^2 = .148$, Adjusted $R^2 = .135$, $F(3,200) = 11.58$, $p < .001$. $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between social networking addiction, coping strategies, rumination, and psychological distress among young adults, with a particular focus on the predictive and mediating role of rumination and coping. The results showed that the overall regression model was significant, explaining fourteen point eight percentage of the variance in psychological distress. Among the predictors, rumination emerged as a significant positive predictor of psychological distress, whereas social networking addiction and coping strategies did not contribute significantly in the regression model. These findings provide important insights into the mechanisms through which social networking use relates to mental health outcomes.

Social Networking Addiction and Psychological Distress: Consistent with the first hypothesis, bivariate correlations suggested an association between social networking addiction and psychological distress, though this relationship did not remain significant when rumination and coping were simultaneously considered in the regression model. This suggests that the effect of social networking addiction on psychological distress may be indirect, operating through cognitive processes such as rumination. Previous research has highlighted the potential risks of excessive social networking use, showing that it is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress (Andreassen et al., 2017;Shahnawaz & Rehman, 2020). A meta-analysis by Du et al. (2024) confirmed that problematic social networking use is strongly associated with anxiety symptoms, while Marino et al. (2018) reported similar links with depressive symptoms. The current findings align with this body of work but further highlight that the direct contribution of social networking addiction to psychological distress is weaker once individual cognitive tendencies like rumination are taken into account. This finding suggests that social networking use may not directly cause distress but creates conditions (such as social comparison, fear of missing out, or exposure to negative content) that trigger ruminative thinking, which in turn leads to heightened distress. This interpretation is supported by studies showing that social media use is associated with upward social comparisons and perseverative negative thinking, which amplify negative emotional states (Feinstein et al., 2013).

Rumination as a Predictor of Psychological Distress: Rumination was found to be a strong and significant predictor of psychological distress, consistent with the third hypothesis. This is in line with prior research indicating that rumination is a maladaptive cognitive style strongly linked to depression and anxiety (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Rumination prolongs negative affect by keeping attention focused on distressing experiences and self-related concerns without contributing to problemsolving (Treyner, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema,2003). Importantly, the current findings support evidence that rumination mediates the relationship between problematic social networking use and mental health problems (Fioravanti et al., 2022). For instance, studies have shown that adolescents and young adults who engage in high levels of social media use are more likely to ruminate, which subsequently increases depressive and anxious symptoms (Liu et al., 2022). Thus, the present study reinforces the role of rumination as a cognitive vulnerability factor, explaining why some individuals who engage in heavy social networking experience higher levels of psychological distress. From a theoretical perspective, these findings are supported by response styles theory (NolenHoeksema,1991), which posits that rumination intensifies and prolongs negative mood states. Within the context of the stress-and-coping framework (Lazarus & Folkman,1984), rumination can be seen as a maladaptive appraisal mechanism that prevents effective emotional regulation, thereby escalating distress.

Coping Strategies and Psychological Distress: Contrary to the second hypothesis, coping strategies did not significantly predict psychological distress in the regression model. This result may reflect the complex and multidimensional nature of coping. Previous research suggests that adaptive coping (e.g., problem-solving, acceptance) tends to be associated with better psychological outcomes, while maladaptive coping (e.g., avoidance, denial, substance use) predicts greater distress (Carver et al., 1989; Eisenberg et al.,2012). However, when measured globally, the predictive power of coping may weaken, especially if both adaptive and maladaptive strategies are aggregated. One possible explanation is that coping strategies may exert indirect effects on psychological distress by influencing levels of perceived stress or

mediating the impact of other variables (Ding et al., 2021). Alternatively, rumination may have overshadowed coping in the regression model. Since rumination itself can be considered a maladaptive form of coping (repetitive emotion focused strategy), its strong predictive effect could explain why coping strategies as measured by the Brief COPE did not emerge as significant predictors in this study. The results of this study are consistent with a growing body of evidence that problematic social networking use is not uniformly harmful but becomes distressing when linked to maladaptive cognitive processes such as rumination (Marino et al., 2018; Fioravanti et al., 2022). This aligns with the I-PACE model of Internet-use disorders (Brand et al., 2016), which suggests that pre dispositional factors (e.g., cognitive styles like rumination) interact with online behaviors to produce addictive or maladaptive outcomes. Furthermore, the non-significant effect of coping in the present study is not entirely inconsistent with prior work. Ding et al. (2021) found that coping style influences distress indirectly via perceived stress, while adaptive coping may buffer distress only under specific situational conditions. This point to the need for more nuanced measures that differentiate between adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies, rather than treating coping as a unified construct.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that while social networking addiction is associated with psychological distress, its direct predictive effect is limited once rumination is accounted for. Rumination emerges as a central predictor, underscoring its role as a cognitive vulnerability mechanism that mediates the relationship between social networking use and mental health outcomes. Coping strategies did not significantly predict distress, possibly due to measurement limitations or indirect pathways not captured in the present design. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of addressing maladaptive cognitive styles, such as rumination, in interventions for individuals experiencing psychological distress linked to social networking use.

VI. LIMITATION

- Cross-sectional design: The use of a cross-sectional survey limits the ability to establish causality among the study variables.
- Self-report bias: Reliance on self-report measures may introduce biases such as social desirability or inaccurate recall.
- Sample characteristics: The use of purposive and convenience sampling, primarily among young adults, limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations.
- Measurement of coping: The Brief COPE measures both adaptive and maladaptive strategies, but the aggregated analysis may not fully capture their distinct effects on distress.
- Unmeasured confounders: Other relevant factors (e.g., social support, personality traits, and sleep quality) were not considered and may have influenced the findings.

VII. IMPLICATION

- The study highlights rumination as a key cognitive factor linking social networking to psychological distress, supporting existing stress and coping theories.
- Findings emphasize the importance of promoting adaptive coping strategies and reducing maladaptive ones to protect mental health in digital contexts.
- Counsellors and psychologists can design interventions such as mindfulness and rumination-focused CBT to manage social media-related distress.
- Educational institutions can introduce digital well-being programs to teach students healthy social media use and emotional regulation.
- Policy makers can use the results to create awareness campaigns and guidelines for responsible online behaviour among youth.
- The research provides a foundation for future studies to explore causal relationships and cultural differences in coping and rumination patterns.

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