

BEYOND THE SCROLL: SOCIAL MEDIA USE, PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND PROBLEMATIC ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract : Social media has become an essential part of people's daily lives, especially young people, enabling them to communicate, be entertained, stay informed, and connect with each other. However, the role of social media in triggering psychological distress and engaging into problematic social media use needs to be further investigated. This paper is aimed at assessing social media usage intensity, the level of psychological distress, and the degree of problematic social media use among respondents. The data were collected from 48 participants who completed a survey. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's product-moment correlation were used for the analysis. The data revealed that social media usage has a weak positive and statistically insignificant correlation with the level of psychological distress ($r=.143$, $p=.333$). Psychological distress was found to have a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation with problematic social media use ($r=.342$, $p=.017$). In turn, social media usage intensity was found to have a weak to moderate positive and statistically insignificant correlation with problematic social media use ($r=.270$, $p=.064$). Hence, the paper's findings suggest that the impact of social media on young people is more concerned with the concept of psychological distress than the intensity of usage.

IndexTerms - Social media use; Social media usage intensity; Psychological distress; Problematic social media use; Mental health; Digital engagement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has revolutionized the way people communicate and connect with each other today. With social media networks and apps such as Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and other digital platforms having become a part of human interaction, people have used them to network and interact with others, exchange information and opinions, and seek social connection. Although social media can be a rewarding experience for many, it can lead to some serious psychological problems.

As with many areas of human life, an individual's mental health is influenced by hundreds of factors. Researchers have been trying to investigate the possible correlation between the use of social media and the development of mental health issues. Such studies are highly relevant given that the use of social media is growing exponentially. Needless to say, the impact of social media is diverse, depending on the intensity and quality of interaction that people experience online. Consequently, studying the influence of social media on mental health should consider multiple variables.

Concept of Social Media Use

The concept of social media use refers to the way individuals engage in social media, its frequency and intensity. In this regard, the usage intensity may vary significantly among individuals. For example, a heavy user of social media may invest hours in it per day, while an average user may interact with it several times a day. Furthermore, the more time people spend on any particular social media accounts, the higher the risk of developing issues related to usage.

Concept of Mental Health

The concept of mental health refers to one's psychological wellbeing or, in other words, the functional or dysfunctional state of one's mind. In this regard, one should note that the human mind can experience distress or pressure in various ways, ranging from worry and concern to sadness, anxiety, frustration, and anger. Multiple studies have demonstrated that social media has a profound effect on people's mental health, though the nature of this relationship is complex.

Rationale

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between the intensity of social media usage, psychological distress, and problematic social media use. Prior research has demonstrated that studying the correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and psychological wellbeing may not be sufficient. A more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon may be built by analyzing such variables as intensity and problematic use.

Significance

The significance of this study is driven by the fact that social media is now a major part of people's social and psychological lives. Understanding the relationship between people's engagement and psychological wellbeing will allow students, teachers, counselors, and professors to be aware of the potential risks and approaches to mitigate them. This research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on mental health issues related to social media.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Seabrook, Kern, and Rickard (2016) performed a systematic review to explore the association between social networking sites and depression and anxiety. Having analyzed the research data of the 2005-2016 period, the scientists concluded that positive social

interaction, social support and connectedness could impact a person positively, while negative interaction and social comparison resulted in worse mental outcomes.

Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020) have conducted a systematic review to analyze the relationship between social media and depression, anxiety, and distress in adolescents. Keles et al. (2020) note that the time spent on social media, activity/investment, and addictive/probabilistic use are linked to the analyzed variables, but researchers admit methodological limitations of the analyzed studies.

Cunningham, Hudson, and Harkness (2021) performed a systematic analysis of research data to identify the link between social media and depression symptoms in youths. The obtained results show that the content of interaction should be considered more than its duration.

Lopes et al. (2022) performed a systematic review to explore the connection between harmful social media use and depression and anxiety. The analyzed data demonstrate that harmful social media use was strongly related to mental health issues, while time spent on social networks was a weak predictor of mental health.

Ahmed et al. (2024) conducted a study that brought together 182 researches and 1,169,396 participants to examine the connection between social media and depression, anxiety, and wellbeing. The results of the analysis prove that social media use does not have a strong link with the analyzed variables, while problematic social media use has a moderate association with them. Researchers note that social media impacts human wellbeing, but its effect depends on individuals' behaviors and social media characteristics.

The scientists who have analyzed the effect of social media on human wellbeing have come to different conclusions. Earlier studies show that social media can make people depressed, anxious, and dissatisfied with their lives. Later research demonstrates that it is not the time spent on social networks that hurts mental health but individuals' attitudes toward their social media experience.

Ansari et al. (2024) have performed a systematic review and meta-analysis of 51 studies and 680,506 participants to detect the influence of social media on wellbeing. The scientists have found that extreme social media use does not have a significant impact on individuals, while problematic social media use has a considerably negative effect on them. Thus, the researchers prove that it is not the quantity of social media use that hurts human wellbeing but its quality.

Summing up the findings of the discussed articles, one can say that social media negatively affects human mental health. Most scientists have proved this hypothesis and stated that the amount of time spent on social networks is not as significant as individuals' attitude towards their social media experience. This study will expand on these findings by analyzing social media use intensity, psychological distress, and problematic social media use in the same sample.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researcher decided to adopt a quantitative correlational research design. The design was suitable for the study because it involved examining the relationships that exist between social media usage intensity, psychological distress and problematic social media use without attempting to manipulate the variables.

Participants

The study had 48 participants. Out of the 48 respondents, 28 (58.3%) belonged to the 10 – 20 years age bracket, 14 (29.2%) were aged between 20 – 30 years, 2 (4.2%) respondents were in the 30 – 40 years bracket and 4 (8.3%) were aged 40 years and older. In terms of gender, the study had 30 (62.5%) female participants, 17 (35.4%) male participants and 1 (2.1%) respondent who preferred not to provide the gender.

Variables

The study focused on social media usage intensity, psychological distress and problematic social media use as the key variables. In addition to the three key variables, the study also focused on psychological wellbeing, validation sensitivity and digital fatigue as derived variables.

Research Question

What is the relationship between social media usage intensity, psychological distress and problematic social media use among the respondents?

Objectives

1. To examine the social media usage intensity among the respondents.
2. To assess the level of psychological distress among the respondents.
3. To investigate the extent of problematic social media use among the respondents.
4. To establish the relationship between social media usage intensity, psychological distress and problematic social media use among the respondents.

Hypotheses

1. H1: There is a significant relationship between social media usage intensity and psychological distress.
2. H2: There is a significant relationship between psychological distress and problematic social media use.
3. H3: There is a significant relationship between social media usage intensity and problematic social media use.

Data Collection

The researcher collected data from 48 participants using a questionnaire. Upon completion of the data collection, the researcher put the data in a spreadsheet and the variables were extracted for analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

The study focused on generating the descriptive statistics of the key variables. Specifically, the researcher calculated the means and standard deviations of the key variables. The study also involved examining the relationships that exist between social media usage intensity, psychological distress and problematic social media use. Thus, the researcher performed Pearson's product-moment correlation at the significance level of .05 to establish whether the relationships were statistically significant.

Rationale for the Method

Pearson's product-moment correlation was suitable for the study because it was necessary to establish the direction and strength of the relationship between scale and continuous level of measurement. Additionally, the test was appropriate to test the above hypotheses.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive Analysis

The mean was 1.94 (SD = 1.92) for the psychological distress score, which denotes that there were different levels of psychological distress reported by the participants. The mean score for problematic social media use was 2.04 (SD = 1.27), whereas the mean for social media usage intensity was 3.08 (SD = 1.11). In turn, the mean level of psychological wellbeing was 3.27 (SD = 1.45).

Table 1: Correlation between Study Variables

Variables	r	p	Interpretation
SM usage intensity × Psychological distress	.143	.333	Weak positive; not significant
Psychological distress × Problematic use	.342	.017	Moderate positive; significant
SM usage intensity × Problematic use	.270	.064	Weak-to-moderate positive; not significant

Interpretation of H1

A weak positive correlation was found between the intensity of social media usage and psychological distress ($r = .143$, $p = .333$). While the direction of the relationship was positive, the correlation was not statistically significant at the .05 level. Thus, H1 was not supported.

Interpretation of H2

A moderate positive correlation was found between psychological distress and problematic social media usage ($r = .342$, $p = .017$). The relationship was statistically significant at the .05 level, indicating that higher levels of psychological distress were associated with greater levels of problematic social media usage in the present sample. Therefore, H2 was supported.

Interpretation of H3

A weak-to-moderate positive correlation was found between the intensity of social media usage and problematic social media usage ($r = .270$, $p = .064$). While the direction of the relationship was positive, it did not reach statistical significance at the .05 level. Thus, H3 was not supported.

Overall Interpretation

The findings suggest that general social media usage intensity was not significantly related to psychological distress or problematic social media usage in the present sample. In contrast, psychological distress showed a statistically significant positive relationship with problematic social media usage. This suggests that the psychological experience associated with social media may be more closely related to problematic patterns of engagement than to the intensity of use overall.

V. CONCLUSION

Summary

The present study investigated the relationship between social media usage intensity, psychological distress and problematic social media use among a sample of 48 respondents. The study employed a quantitative correlational design and used Pearson's product-moment correlation to examine the associations between these variables. The results revealed that there was a weak, non-significant positive correlation between social media usage intensity and psychological distress. There was a moderate and significantly positive association between psychological distress and problematic social media use. There was a weak-to-moderate positive, non-significant association between social media usage intensity and problematic social media use.

Hypothesis Decisions

H1 was not supported because, while the association between social media usage intensity and psychological distress was weak, it was not statistically significant. H2 was supported since there was a significant and moderately positive association between psychological distress and problematic social media use. H3 was not supported because the association between social media usage intensity and problematic social media use was not statistically significant.

Implications

The findings of the present study have significant implications for understanding the role of social media in an individual's life. It is vital to go beyond just the time spent on the platforms and concentrate on problematic use, loss of control and the psychological underpinnings. Educational institutes should focus on encouraging healthy patterns of social media use and promote a balanced digital and offline lifestyle.

Limitations

The present study's main limitation was the relatively small sample size of 48 respondents. The design of the study is correlational, so the findings do not reveal the causal relationships between the investigated constructs. Furthermore, the data were self-reported, so the results might reflect biased perspectives of the participants. Lastly, the sample might not be representative of the general population.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research might consider using a larger and more diverse sample of participants. It would be vital to utilise a longitudinal design to understand the complex relationships between the variables of interest better. Additionally, future studies could compare different social media platforms and assess the impact of such behaviours as social comparison, seeking validation, being a victim of cyberbullying, experiencing digital fatigue and the type of content consumed.

Final Conclusion

The present paper revealed that simply increasing the amount of time spent on social media platforms might not be associated with significant psychological distress. Instead, researchers and practitioners should focus on other variables, such as problematic social media use. The findings suggest that it is essential to consider a complex interplay of factors associated with social media engagement rather than concentrating on a single construct.

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APPENDIX I : GOOGLE FORM

Purpose: To understand the impact of social media on a person's mental health.

The following questions were presented to the respondents for research purposes. Respondents were requested to answer as honestly as possible.

Demographic Information

1. Name — Short answer
2. Age (in years)
 - 0–10
 - 10–20
 - 20–30
 - 30–40
 - 40 and above
3. Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to say
 - Other

Questions

4. Are you on any social media platforms?
 - Yes
 - No
5. Which social media platforms do you use?
 - Facebook
 - Instagram
 - Twitter
 - Snapchat
 - Other
6. How many hours do you spend on social media in a day?
 - Less than 1 hour

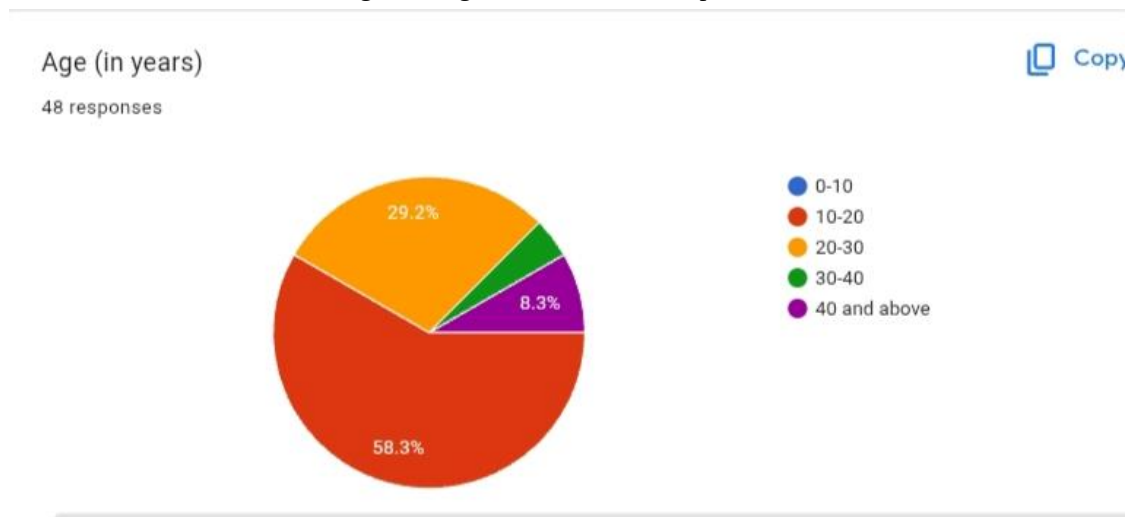
- 1 hour
 - 2 hours
 - 3 hours
 - 4 hours and above
 - Other
7. Do you like spending your free time scrolling through social media?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
8. Does scrolling through social media improve your mood?
- Yes
 - No
 - Can't say
9. Does social media make you feel validated?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
10. Does scrolling through social media give you a sense of belongingness or connectivity?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
11. After posting on social media, are you bothered by the likes or comments on your posts?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
12. After scrolling through social media, do you feel if there is a change in your behavior?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
13. Do others feel if there is a change in your behavior?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
- This question was asked in continuation to the previous question.
14. Does scrolling through social media make you feel lonely or sad?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
15. Does scrolling through social media make you feel anxious or worried?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
16. Does scrolling through social media make you feel jealous or envious?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
17. Do you feel a sense of guilt if you don't scroll through social media one day?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
18. Do you feel tired after scrolling through social media?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe

APPENDIX II : GOOGLE FORM RESPONSE CHARTS

The following charts present the demographic profile and social media usage patterns of the 48 respondents who participated in the study.

1. Age Distribution

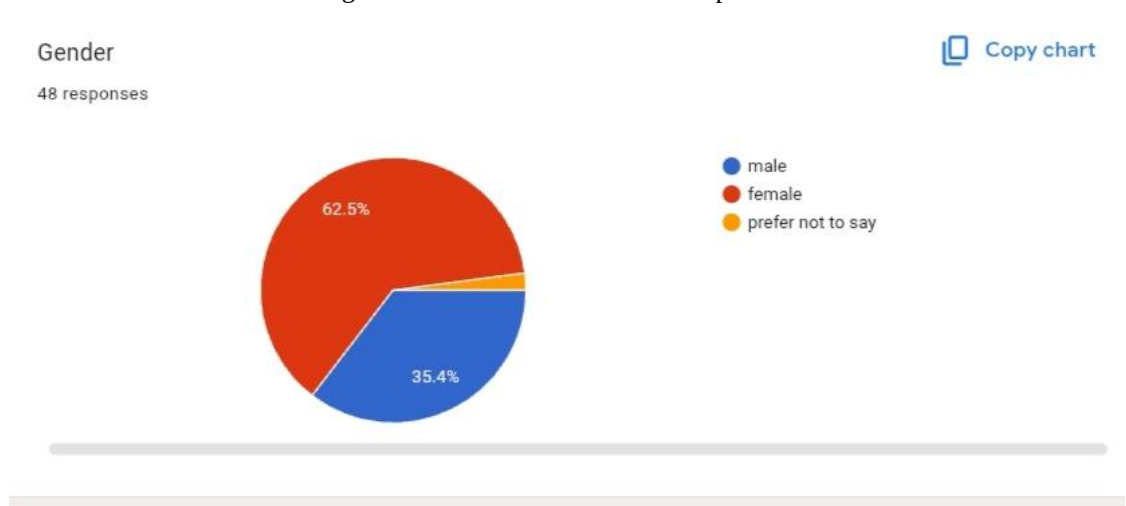
Figure 1: Age Distribution of Respondents



The age distribution of the respondents is presented in Figure 1. It can be seen that the majority of respondents (58.3%) belong to the 10–20 years age group. The second largest group comprised those who were aged 20–30 years (29.2%). Furthermore, 8.3% of the respondents were aged 40 years or older, while 4.2% of the respondents belong to the 30–40 years age group. Notably, there were no respondents who were members of the 0–10 years age bracket. Overall, it can be seen that the largest proportion of the sample belonged to the young age groups.

2. Gender Distribution

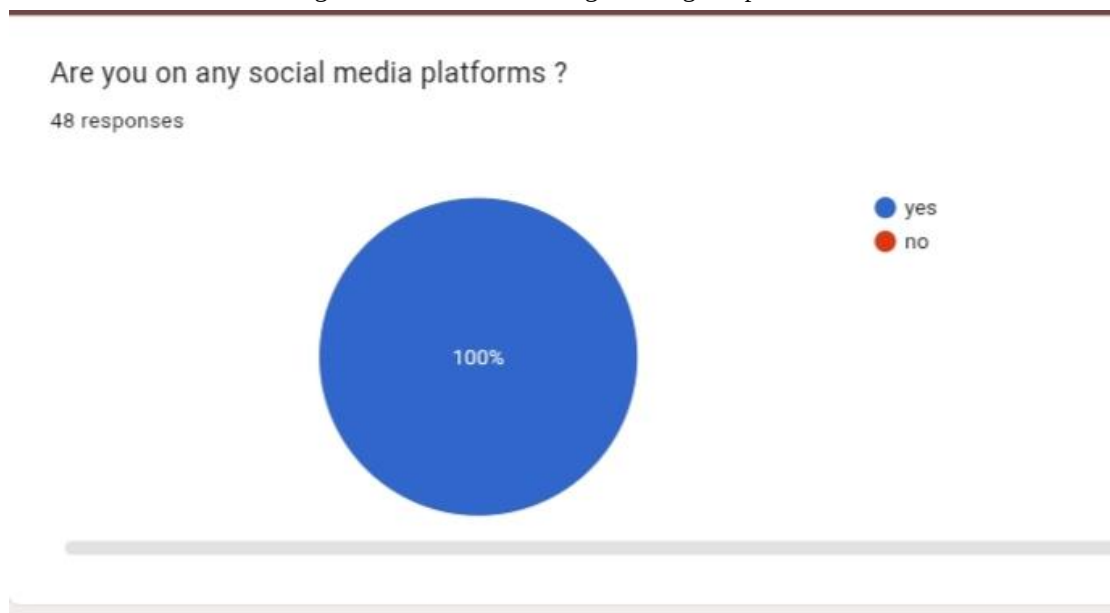
Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents



The gender distribution of the respondents shows that 62.5% were female, 35.4% were male, and 2.1% preferred not to disclose their gender. In that case, the biggest proportion of the study participants were female respondents.

3. Use of Social Media Platforms

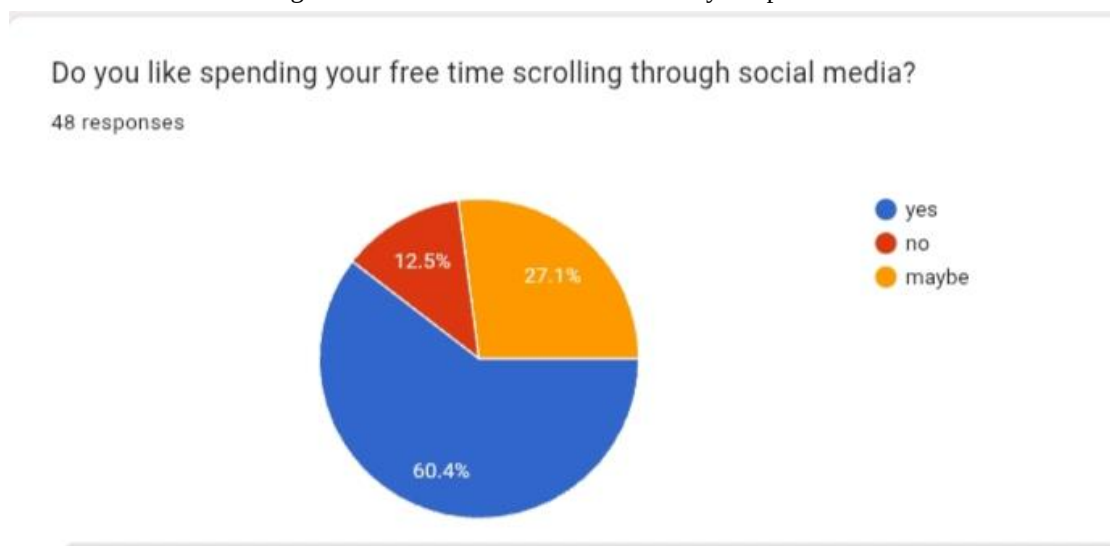
Figure 3: Social Media Usage Among Respondents



The chart shows that 100% of respondents use one or more social media platforms. This can be deemed as evidence that social media was a pervasive element in the respondents' lives and hence relevant to the objectives of this study.

4. Social Media Platforms Used

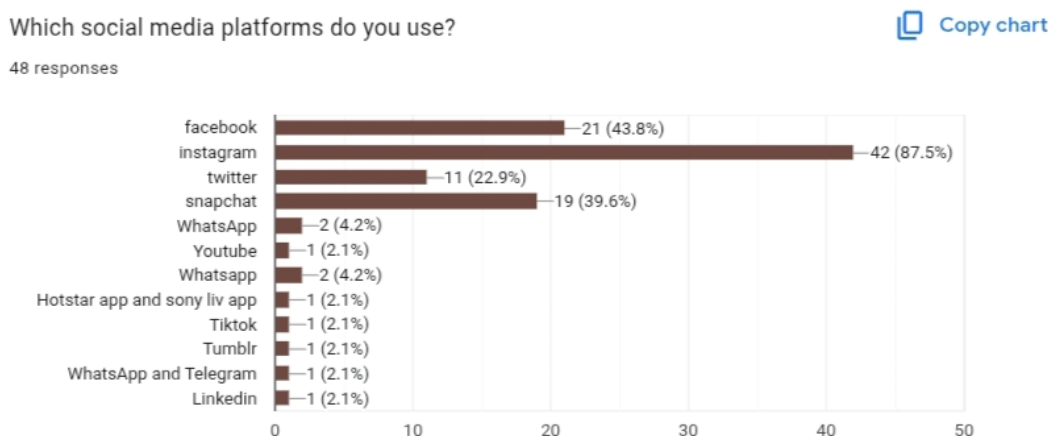
Figure 4: Social Media Platforms Used by Respondents



Of the reported platforms, Instagram was the most used among the respondents. Overall, 42 people or 87.5% of the participants use Instagram. Facebook and Snapchat follow in the second and third positions with 21 (43.8%) and 19 (39.6%) respectively. 11 (22.9%) respondents use Twitter. WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Tumblr, LinkedIn, and others were also reported. From the collected data, it can be seen that respondents use multiple platforms. However, Instagram appears to be the dominant one.

5. Daily Social Media Usage

Figure 5: Daily Social Media Usage of Respondents



The daily usage chart shows variation in the time respondents spent on social media. The highest proportion of the sample (29.2%) allocated about 2 hours a day to visiting social media platforms. This was followed by those spending 4 hours or more (16.7%) and 3 hours (14.6%). About 12.5% of respondents said they spend less than an hour on social media daily, and the rest reported spending approximately one hour viewing sites. On the whole, the results show that social media has become a regular part of the respondents' lives as most are allocating multiple hours to it.

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