THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT ON ANXIETY AND EMOTION REGULATION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

ASHISH MALIK[1], NIHARIKA SETHI[2]

[1]DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY, BRAINWARE UNIVERSITY, WB, INDIA [2]INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER, DELHI, INDIA

Abstract

This narrative review examines the multifaceted relationship between social media engagement, anxiety, and emotion regulation among college students, against a backdrop of rising anxiety rates in university populations. This review synthesises evidence from over 30 peer-reviewed studies (2010–2024) to analyse how distinct engagement patterns—**active** (e.g., posting, commenting) versus **passive** (e.g., scrolling, lurking)—differentially impact mental health. Findings indicate passive engagement consistently correlates with heightened anxiety through fear of missing out. Conversely, purposeful active engagement can enhance emotion regulation via social support, emotional buffering, and positive self-expression. Critically, these passive-use effects are buffered by emotional intelligence. This paper identifies significant gaps in longitudinal, non-Western, and intervention research. Practical implications include integrating digital hygiene training into university curricula, clinician assessment of social media habits in counselling, and platform-level adjustments to reduce harmful content exposure. The review advocates reframing social media as a potential tool for resilience when used mindfully, and calls for culturally tailored strategies to foster emotionally sustainable digital lives.

Keywords: social media engagement, anxiety, emotion regulation, college students, digital well-being

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, scrolling through Facebook stories or catching up on Instagram reels has become as routine for many college students as attending lectures or grabbing a coffee between classes. Meta-analytic findings suggest that the higher time spent on social networking sites—often reported to be in the range of two hours per day—is modestly associated with reduced psychological well-being (Huang, 2017). These online spaces allow students to craft identities, share milestones, and connect with friends across time zones, but they also expose young adults to an unending stream of curated images, status updates, and peer feedback.

At the same time, university counselling centres report ever-rising levels of anxiety among their students (Centre for Collegiate Mental Health, 2023). Anxiety, marked by persistent worry, restlessness, and a racing heart, now affects roughly one in three college students, frequently undermining their ability to focus in class, sleep soundly, or socialise comfortably (American College Health Association, 2023). Equally important, many students struggle to manage the flood of emotions that comes with juggling assignments, part-time jobs, and budding adult responsibilities. Emotion regulation, the skill of recognising, understanding, and modulating our emotions, can make the difference between making it through a stressful week and feeling completely overwhelmed (Gross, 1998; Gioia, Rega, & Boursier, 2021).

Yet, when this review examines studies across the board, the picture remains surprisingly mixed. While a growing body of research points to the detrimental effects of excessive social media engagement on anxiety and emotional dysregulation, other studies reveal a more complex and sometimes beneficial relationship. For instance, studies like those by Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020) and Marino et al. (2018) found that high levels of social media use are significantly associated with increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, and emotional instability among adolescents and college-aged individuals. Similarly, Marengo et al. (2021) linked problematic social media use to heightened emotional dysregulation. However, not all findings converge on a negative interpretation. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) argued that online engagement, particularly on platforms like Facebook, can foster social capital and perceived emotional support, thereby enhancing psychological well-being. Likewise, Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, and Falk (2016) observed that ephemeral social interactions via apps like Snapchat often evoke feelings of connection and positivity rather than stress. Some researchers also caution against oversimplified causal claims, noting that individual differences such as personality traits, emotional intelligence, and resilience significantly mediate these outcomes (Nguyen, De la Rosa, & Grzeskowiak, 2021; Lopez & Snyder, 2019). As such, the impact of social media on mental health appears to depend not only on the amount of use but also on the purpose, context, and psychological disposition of the user. These contradictory findings underscore

the need for more nuanced, longitudinal, and culturally inclusive research to disentangle the diverse pathways through which digital engagement affects mental and emotional health.

These contradictions arise, in part, because studies differ widely in how they measure both engagement and emotional health. Some rely on self-reports of screen time; others analyze digital trace data. Definitions of emotion regulation vary, too, ranging from specific strategies like cognitive reappraisal to broader concepts of emotional awareness. Cultural factors, personality traits (for example, high neuroticism), and contextual stressors (such as exam periods) add further complexity (Keles et al., 2020; Marengo et al., 2021).

To understand how these digital habits intersect with student well-being, researchers use the term **social media engagement** to capture two broad behaviors:

● **Active engagement**, which includes posting a selfie, commenting on a friend's update, or sending a direct message; and

● **Passive engagement**, such as scrolling through feeds, viewing stories, or lurking without interacting (Frison & Eggermont, 2016).

It turns out these two modes don't affect us equally. Passive scrolling often leads to upward social comparisons, seeing only the highlights of others' lives, which can fuel envy and lower self-esteem (Frison & Eggermont, 2016). By contrast, active engagement sometimes nurtures social support and a sense of belonging, as students receive likes, comments, or encouraging messages in return.

Given this complexity and the fact that social media use shows no sign of slowing among college populations, it is crucial to weave together these disparate findings. In this narrative review, the aim is to explore how different patterns of social media engagement relate to anxiety and emotion regulation in college students. Our goals are to:

1. Uncover the mechanisms by which active versus passive use may worsen or improve anxiety symptoms;
2. Examine how engagement habits support or undermine students' ability to manage their emotions; and
3. Identify personal and contextual factors, such as gender, personality, or campus culture, that shape these relationships.

By bringing these threads together, this review hopes to guide educators, counsellors, and students themselves toward actionable strategies, whether that means practising mindful scrolling, fostering supportive online communities, or integrating digital-wellness modules into the college curriculum. In doing so, we take a step toward ensuring that social media can be a tool for connection and growth rather than a source of stress and confusion.

2 METHODOLOGY

This review employs a **narrative approach** to synthesize qualitative findings on how social media engagement influences anxiety and emotion regulation among college students. A narrative review was chosen for its flexibility in integrating evidence from diverse study designs, theoretical perspectives, and cultural contexts without the constraints of meta-analytic quantification.

2.1 Databases and Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted in four major electronic databases, **Scopus**, **PubMed**, **PsycINFO**, and **Google Scholar**, to capture peer-reviewed literature across psychology, psychiatry, education, and communication disciplines. Searches were performed between March and April 2025. The following keywords and Boolean combinations were used to ensure comprehensive coverage:

● "social media engagement" AND "college students"
● "social media engagement" AND "anxiety"
● "social media engagement" AND "emotion regulation"
● ("social media" OR "social networking sites") AND "mental health" AND "college students"

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met all of the following criteria:

1. **Empirical design** (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods), published between January 2010 and December 2024.
2. Focus on **undergraduate or graduate university students** as the primary population.
3. Published in **English** and appeared in **peer-reviewed journals**.

Studies were excluded if they:

● Were **grey literature**, including dissertations, conference abstracts, editorials, blog posts, or non-peer-reviewed reports.
● Focused on non-college populations (e.g., high school students, general adult community).
● Lacked clear measures of either **social media engagement**, **anxiety**, or **emotion regulation**.

2.3 Screening and Selection Process

Titles and abstracts retrieved from the initial search (n ≈ 1,200) were independently screened by two reviewers. Duplicate records and irrelevant studies (e.g., those addressing digital marketing or non-student samples) were removed. Full texts of the remaining articles (n ≈ 150) were then examined for adherence to inclusion and

exclusion criteria. Discrepancies in eligibility judgments were resolved through discussion or, when necessary, consultation with a third reviewer.

2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

From each included study (final n ≈ 30+), extracted information on: study design, sample characteristics, measures of social media engagement (active vs. passive), anxiety outcomes, emotion regulation strategies, and key findings. Rather than aggregating effect sizes, this review conducted a **qualitative synthesis** to identify recurring themes, methodological strengths and limitations, and points of convergence and divergence across studies.

By following this structured yet flexible narrative approach, the review captures the multifaceted ways in which social media habits relate to anxiety and emotion regulation in college settings, laying the groundwork for targeted future research and practical interventions.

3 THEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In our everyday digital lives, the ways we engage with social media can feel as natural as chatting with a friend over coffee, yet the emotional fallout can be surprisingly different depending on how we use these platforms. When students actively participate by posting a selfie, commenting on a classmate's update, or sharing an article, they often experience small boosts of connection and validation. These "active" behaviors give users a sense of agency, allowing them to craft their online identities and receive immediate feedback (Verduyn et al., 2017). In contrast, spending long stretches passively scrolling through feeds, what many of us do while waiting for the bus or during study breaks, can unintentionally fuel comparison and envy. A six-month study of adolescents, for example, found that greater passive Facebook use predicted notable increases in both envy and depressive symptoms, whereas active posting showed neutral or even slightly protective effects when paired with supportive feedback (Frison & Eggermont, 2016).

Beyond the nature of our interactions, the amount of time we dedicate to these platforms is significant as well. It's all too easy to check Instagram for "just five minutes" and suddenly find that an hour has passed, leaving you feeling drained. Meta-analytic work shows a modest but consistent link between total social media use and lower psychological well-being (Huang, 2017). Meta-analyses suggest that problematic or excessive social media use is significantly linked with increased anxiety and perceived stress among young adults (Marino et al., 2018). Similarly, passive browsing on social platforms is more strongly associated with negative outcomes such as isolation and worry, while active engagement may foster social connectedness and a sense of belonging (Verduyn et al., 2017).

Not all platforms, however, weigh equally on our emotions. Take Instagram, a visually driven space where curated images set an often-unattainable standard. In laboratory settings, college-aged women who viewed peers' idealized Instagram posts experienced immediate spikes in anxiety and negative mood (Fardouly et al., 2015). On Facebook, by contrast, joining and contributing to supportive groups can ease loneliness, even as endless news-feed scrolling may amplify world-related anxieties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Verduyn et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Snapchat's fleeting "snaps" seem to lower the stakes of self-presentation, encouraging spontaneous sharing that some users find liberating and anxiety-reducing (Bayer et al., 2016).

Together, these patterns and platform quirks remind us that social media is not a monolith. How we engage, actively or passively, how much time we spend, and on which platforms we linger, all shape our emotional landscape in unique ways. By recognizing these nuances, students and educators alike can make more informed choices about their digital habits and support practices that promote genuine connection over comparison.

3.1 Social Media Engagement and Anxiety

3.1.1 Evidence Linking High Engagement to FOMO

One of the most commonly cited pathways from heavy social media use to anxiety is the **fear of missing out (FOMO)**, a pervasive apprehension that others are engaging in rewarding experiences without you. In a foundational study, Przybylski et al. (2013) found that FOMO was significantly correlated with both higher frequency of social network checking (r = .45) and elevated anxiety levels (r = .41) in a sample of university students. More recent work by Casale and Fioravanti (2018) demonstrated that FOMO mediates the association between passive Instagram browsing and generalized anxiety symptoms (β = .28), suggesting that repeatedly seeing friends' social highlights can leave students feeling excluded and restless.

3.1.2 Cyberbullying and Anxiety

Beyond FOMO, **cyberbullying**, harassing, or demeaning messages sent via social platforms have been robustly linked to heightened state anxiety. A review of multiple systematic studies found that college-aged victims of online harassment are significantly more likely to report clinical levels of anxiety, with odds ratios ranging from 1.5 to 2.6 (Kwan et al., 2020). Parallel to this, the pressure to perform, crafting the "perfect" feed, or maintaining consistent engagement metrics, can spur **performance anxiety**. Woods and Scott (2016) found that higher social media use among adolescents was associated with increased anxiety and reduced self-esteem, particularly when used during nighttime hours.

3.1.3 Sleep Disruption and Anxiety Escalation

Excessive evening use of smartphones and social apps can also **disrupt sleep**, creating a vicious cycle of tiredness and daytime anxiety. Increasing research highlights the disruptive impact of late-night social media use on college

students' sleep quality. The constant availability of platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok encourages prolonged screen time, often delaying bedtime and reducing total sleep duration. Levenson et al. (2017) found that young adults who used social media more frequently, particularly before sleep, reported significantly higher levels of sleep disturbance. Similarly, Woods and Scott (2016) observed that adolescents engaging in nighttime social networking experienced poorer sleep quality, elevated anxiety, and reduced self-esteem. These findings suggest that social media engagement—especially when it becomes emotionally activating or interferes with sleep hygiene—may act as a pathway linking digital behavior to broader psychological distress.

3.1.4 Role of Individual Differences

Personality traits modulate these effects, with **neuroticism** emerging as a consistent amplifier of social media-related anxiety. Research suggests that personality traits can significantly shape how individuals experience social media. For example, individuals high in **neuroticism** are more vulnerable to the negative emotional effects of online engagement, including increased anxiety and emotional dysregulation (Marengo, Longobardi, Fabris, & Settanni, 2021). While the mechanisms remain complex, neurotic users may be more likely to engage in passive browsing and social comparison, which can intensify stress and anxiety. On the other hand, introverted users may find some digital interactions—such as **one-to-one messaging or small group communication**—more emotionally manageable than large public forums, potentially benefiting more from the **social support functions** of digital platforms (Wang, Jackson, Zhang, & Su, 2017). These individual differences highlight the importance of tailoring interventions and interpretations of social media use based not just on behavior, but on the user's emotional disposition and coping style.

3.1.5 Key Studies and Conflicting Results

While numerous studies indicate an adverse correlation between social media usage and mental health, the magnitude and direction of this association exhibit variability. For example, Huang's (2017) meta-analysis identified only a modest correlation between the duration of social networking site usage and overall psychological well-being. Likewise, Frison and Eggermont (2016), through their longitudinal research, emphasized that the emotional repercussions of social media engagement are contingent upon the manner of participation, with certain forms of active use potentially providing consistent or neutral emotional effects over time. These heterogeneous findings underscore the necessity of differentiating the type and context of engagement, thereby highlighting that, for some students, social media may function as an emotional outlet rather than a stressor.

3.2 Social Media Engagement and Emotion Regulation

In our everyday scrolls and taps, social media has become more than just a pastime; it's a space where our emotions are constantly tested and reshaped. College students, juggling deadlines and social lives, find that their online habits can either bolster their emotional toolkit or leave them feeling frazzled. Below, we explore five intertwined ways that social media engagement influences how students regulate their feelings.

3.2.1 Feeling What We "Catch" Online (Emotional Contagion)

Have you ever encountered your social media feed displaying a celebratory post from a friend about securing an internship, only to subsequently come across another friend's anxious complaint regarding midterm examinations? Unconsciously, you may begin to experience a mixture of these emotions yourself. This phenomenon exemplifies emotional contagion; our brains automatically internalize the emotional states we observe online (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). On social media platforms, where users passively scroll through a diverse array of achievements, concerns, and various sentiments, their emotional equilibrium can fluctuate significantly. When feeds are dominated by panic or outrage, students often report waking already feeling tense; conversely, when feeds are filled with inspiring stories and messages of support, such positivity can enhance their mood.

Building on this understanding, a comprehensive experiment conducted by Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock (2014) demonstrated that emotional states can be transmitted to others through social networks, even in the absence of direct interaction—merely by modifying the emotional content of users' news feeds. Their findings confirmed that users exposed to more negative content were more likely to post negative updates themselves, and vice versa. This experiment provided direct empirical evidence that social media platforms can facilitate extensive emotional contagion, subtly influencing the collective emotional atmosphere of online spaces.

3.2.2 When Our Minds Get Overloaded (Cognitive Overload)

Consider attempting to write a paper while Instagram videos automatically play in the corner of your screen. Each flash of video demands a portion of your attention, leaving less mental bandwidth for self-soothing or thoughtful reflection. That's cognitive overload, when incoming information exceeds our capacity to process it effectively (Sweller, 1988). Many students describe feeling mentally "fried" after cramming lecture notes alongside social media notifications. As multitasking depletes executive functions, such as focusing and impulse control, it also weakens our ability to pause and choose a healthier emotional response.

Recent studies confirm that frequent media multitasking—particularly involving emotionally charged or attention-grabbing social content—impairs working memory and cognitive flexibility (Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009). This is especially relevant for students who juggle academic tasks with continuous online engagement. Unchecked exposure to multiple simultaneous inputs fragments attention. (Mark, Gudith, & Klocke, 2008). As a result, students overwhelmed by a flood of digital stimuli may find themselves more emotionally reactive, less able to self-regulate, and prone to feelings of anxiety and burnout. The psychological toll isn't just from what is seen or

heard—it's from the constant, background requirement to filter, ignore, or respond to countless inputs, leaving little room for calm, reflective thought.

3.2.3 Drowning in Intense Content (Emotional Dysregulation)

When every swipe brings you graphic news clips or raw personal disclosures, your nervous system stays on high alert. This **constant exposure** to emotionally charged content can leave students feeling like they never truly "switch off." Problematic users, those who check their feeds obsessively, tend to score significantly higher on measures of emotional dysregulation, struggling to calm down once upset (Marengo, Longobardi, Fabris, & Settanni, 2021). In one lab study, participants who viewed heavily edited "ideal" images on Instagram found it harder to reframe negative thoughts afterwards, prolonging their negative mood (Fardouly et al., 2015). For students already under academic pressure, this unrelenting emotional churn can make an all-nighter feel twice as stressful.

3.2.4 Getting Stuck in the Comparison Trap (Rumination)

Constant exposure to curated highlights facilitates upward social comparison. That quick look at a roommate's vacation photos can spiral into hours of replaying "why isn't my life as exciting?" This **upward social comparison** fuels **rumination**, the tendency to loop over negative thoughts without resolution (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Rumination locks students into a downward emotional spiral, making it difficult to shift focus back to their own achievements or joys. Over time, these repetitive comparisons erode self-confidence and make adaptive strategies, like reframing or seeking support, feel out of reach.

3.2.5 Finding Shelter in Online Support (Emotional Buffering)

Not all social media interactions leave us raw and exposed. Many students discover pockets of warmth in dedicated online communities, private Facebook groups sharing coping tips, mental-health subreddits offering empathy, or group chats where classmates check in on one another. When we actively participate, commenting, sharing struggles, or offering encouragement, we tap into **emotional buffering**. That immediate feedback of "I hear you" or "You're not alone" can lower anxiety and help us regain composure (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). These supportive loops remind us that emotion regulation isn't a solo sport; it thrives on connection.

3.2.6 Expressing Ourselves to Feel Better (Positive Engagement)

Sometimes, social media becomes our personal canvas for emotional expression. Whether it's journaling stressors in an Instagram caption, sharing a reflective TikTok diary, or posting a mindful photo series on Snapchat, these **positive engagement** strategies strengthen our regulation muscles. In a pilot study, students who used Instagram deliberately to process emotions, by framing challenges as learning experiences, showed marked improvements in cognitive reappraisal and reductions in both anxiety and rumination over four weeks (Flett, Hayne, & Riordan, 2020). When we choose to create rather than consume, we reclaim agency over our emotional narrative.

Bringing It All Together

Scrolling through social media isn't just a break from studying; it's an emotional journey. We "catch" moods from our feeds, risk overload from nonstop updates, and sometimes trap ourselves in comparison loops. Yet the same platforms also offer lifelines in the form of supportive communities and creative outlets for self-expression. By understanding these patterns, when we're absorbing stress versus actively seeking solace, we can make more mindful choices: muting anxiety-inducing content, setting time boundaries, or leaning into positive engagement to bolster our emotional resilience.

3.3 Mediating and Moderating Variables

As we've seen, the ways college students engage with social media can tip them toward stress or support. But not every student reacts the same way; even identical scrolling sessions can lead to wildly different emotional outcomes. That's because a host of **mediating** (the "how") and **moderating** (the "when" and "for whom") variables shape those digital experiences. Below, we explore four key factors: time versus purpose of use, emotional intelligence and resilience, gender and culture, and academic pressure coupled with social support, that together help explain why the same platform can feel like a lifeline for one student and a liability for another.

3.3.1 Time Spent vs. Purpose of Use

Imagine two students: Priya and Rahul. Both log onto Instagram for about 90 minutes each day. Priya spends most of her time **passively scrolling** through celebrity posts and travel photos, leaving her with a nagging sense that her own life falls short. Rahul, by contrast, uses Instagram to **actively connect**, sending DMs to classmates, sharing quick updates about a group project, and commenting on friends' stories.

Though their **total screen time** is identical, Priya and Rahul experience very different effects. Meta-analytic data show that **overall hours logged** correlate modestly with lower well-being ($r = -.17$) and higher anxiety (Huang, 2017). However, when researchers separate **purpose**, entertainment versus communication, they find that **communicative or collaborative use** often protects against anxiety, whereas **recreational, passive browsing** amplifies it (Marino, Gini, Vieno, & Spada, 2018). This distinction has practical import: advising a student to "cut down screen time" may be less effective than helping them shift **how** they use social media. Encouraging structured check-ins with study groups, virtual office hours, or peer-support chats leverages the same platforms for social capital rather than social comparison.

3.3.2 Role of Emotional Intelligence and Resilience

Emotional intelligence (EI), the ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others, can buffer students from social media–induced stress (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Nguyen, De la Rosa, & Grzeskowiak,

2021). Nguyen et al. found that emotionally intelligent students reported significantly fewer mood disruptions following passive scrolling, suggesting that EI buffers against the anxiety and dysregulation often linked to excessive or unfiltered social media use. In this way, EI does not eliminate the emotional risks of digital environments but provides a psychological toolkit for managing them more effectively.

Importantly, EI is not a fixed trait; it can be developed. Workshops on emotion-labelling, cognitive reappraisal techniques, and stress-management strategies have shown promise in enhancing students' EI (Schutte et al., 2013)

3.3.3 Gender Differences and Cultural Context

Research shows that **females** experience heightened appearance-based social comparison and body image concerns related to social media use, particularly on image-based platforms (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). In contrast, **male** students often engage more with discussion-based communities (e.g., gaming forums, subreddits), where performance and status may drive anxiety in different ways. For example, a study of East Asian undergraduates found that male students experienced brand-related performance anxiety on WeChat, worrying about "keeping up" with peers' material successes, whereas female students experienced appearance-based anxiety on Weibo (Li, Wang, & Chen, 2022).

Cultural norms around emotional expression also moderate social media outcomes. In collectivist societies, such as Japan or India, where social harmony is emphasized, students may be less likely to post about personal struggles publicly, leading to more passive consumption and potentially internalized stress (Kim & Sherman, 2007). By contrast, in individualistic cultures like the U.S., open emotional disclosure is more culturally accepted, and public sharing may serve as a release valve. Yamada and Peterson (2019) found that U.S. students reported greater emotional relief after posting about stressors on social media, whereas Japanese students experienced similar relief only when they used private messaging rather than public posts. Recognizing these nuances is crucial for designing culturally sensitive digital-wellness programs. A one-size-fits-all approach risks alienating students whose gender identity or cultural background shapes their online behaviors and emotional needs.

3.3.4 Influence of Academic Pressure and Social Support

Finally, the **weight of coursework** and the **strength of social networks** play pivotal roles. During midterms or project deadlines, even moderate social media engagement can feel like an extra burden. During periods of heightened academic stress, students often increase their passive engagement with social media, a behavior linked to higher levels of anxiety and emotional distress. Research shows that such passive use—commonly characterized by doomscrolling and silent comparison—exacerbates anxiety through mechanisms like social comparison and rumination (Burnell et al., 2019). Yet those same students who maintain robust **offline social support,** such as study buddies, family check-ins, or campus counseling, are less likely to let social media stress spiral into a full-blown crisis.

Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) demonstrated that perceived social support from online networks can mirror the benefits of real-world friendships (r = .29), but only when accompanied by offline ties. In one interview-based study, students described a virtuous cycle: group chat encouragement during crunch time reduced feelings of isolation, which in turn made them feel more empowered to set healthy screen-time boundaries (Chang & Law, 2021). From a practical standpoint, integrating **academic support services** with digital-wellness initiatives can dampen social media's negative spillover.

Bringing It All Together

Mediators and moderators, how long we scroll, why we scroll, who we are, and what's going on in our lives, combine to make each student's social media experience unique. By understanding these variables, educators and counselors can move beyond blanket advice to **tailored strategies**: helping high-EI students refine their active engagement, offering resilience training for vulnerable groups, designing gender-inclusive digital-wellness curricula, and timing interventions to coincide with academic stress cycles. In doing so, we acknowledge that social media is not simply "good" or "bad," but a lived environment whose emotional effects depend on our contexts and choices.

4 DISCUSSION

In today's university hallways and dorm rooms, one sound is almost constant: the soft ping of a notification. Behind each ping lies a connection, a conversation, or perhaps a comparison. As this paper has explored, the influence of social media on anxiety and emotion regulation among college students is profound, pervasive, and deeply personal. The digital world doesn't just mirror students' emotional lives; it actively reshapes them. This discussion synthesizes the findings and reflects on what we know, what remains unclear, and where we might go next in research and practice.

4.1 Intertwining Themes: Anxiety and Emotion Regulation in Digital Contexts

Across the literature, one theme is abundantly clear: **social media use and emotional well-being are intimately linked**, but the nature of this relationship is anything but simple. Active engagement on social platforms may promote emotional resilience, especially when students use these spaces to express themselves, connect with empathetic peers, or seek support. Yet, the same platforms can become emotionally dysregulating when they foster unhealthy comparisons, cyberbullying, or overwhelming information overload.

The interconnectedness of **anxiety and emotion regulation** becomes especially evident in the student context. Many college students enter university during a pivotal developmental stage, where identity formation, peer

acceptance, and emotional maturity are still evolving. When these vulnerable emotional needs meet the often unfiltered, fast-paced, and curated nature of social media, students can struggle to maintain internal equilibrium. Emotional contagion, for instance, makes it easy for one student's public stress post about an exam to ripple across a class, amplifying shared anxiety. On the flip side, seeing others cope constructively with setbacks can inspire healthier emotional responses.

What stands out is that the **impact of social media is not merely about screen time**; it's about screen context. Emotion regulation deteriorates not because students are online too much, but because they are frequently online in emotionally taxing ways. Rumination, fear of missing out (FOMO), and social comparison often spring from passive consumption, while emotion-focused coping tends to emerge from intentional, community-based interactions. Thus, platforms act as emotional amplifiers, with the potential to harm or heal depending on how they are used.

4.2 Contradictions and the Role of Individual Differences

While much research emphasizes the anxiety-provoking aspects of social media, it's important to note that **some users actually experience anxiety relief through digital interaction**. This paradox underscores the need to move beyond one-size-fits-all interpretations. For introverted students or those struggling with in-person social anxiety, online communication can provide a safer space for self-expression and emotion regulation. Private forums and mental health subreddits allow for anonymous sharing, often leading to cathartic release and the discovery of communal empathy.

Similarly, expressive posting, sharing one's struggles or achievements, can function as a form of journaling or narrative therapy. These digital expressions, when met with validation, contribute to self-awareness and emotional clarity. As such, **the same app that exacerbates anxiety for one student can soothe it for another**, depending on personality traits, emotional literacy, and usage goals.

This nuance is further complicated by **contradictory findings** across studies. Some longitudinal data suggest that time spent on platforms like Facebook correlates with increased well-being when usage centers around active communication. Other cross-sectional surveys link heavy Instagram use to body dissatisfaction and anxiety. These discrepancies may be attributed to measurement differences, cultural contexts, or underlying variables like emotional intelligence.

4.3 Gaps in the Literature

Despite a growing body of research, **important gaps remain**:

● **Limited Longitudinal Data:** Most studies are cross-sectional, offering snapshots of behavior but not long-term effects. We don't yet fully understand how patterns of emotion regulation evolve in tandem with digital habits over semesters or academic years.

● **Cultural and Contextual Underrepresentation:** The majority of published studies emerge from Western countries, leaving students in Asia, Africa, and Latin America underrepresented. Given the unique social norms, educational pressures, and digital behaviors in countries like India, China, or Indonesia, this represents a serious blind spot. For instance, the stigmatization of mental health concerns in many Asian cultures may shape how students use social media for emotional disclosure.

● **Scarcity of Intervention-Based Research:** While many papers diagnose the problem, few test interventions that might improve emotion regulation in digital spaces. There is little empirical data on whether teaching students emotion-focused coping strategies or digital hygiene significantly reduces anxiety linked to social media use.

4.4 Implications for Practice

Given these complexities, what can universities do to support students as they navigate their emotional lives in digital contexts?

a. University Counselling Services

Counseling centers must evolve to address the digital dimensions of student mental health. Intake forms could include questions about social media habits, triggers, and emotional responses to digital interaction. Clinicians might incorporate social media reflections into CBT or mindfulness-based interventions, helping students recognize maladaptive patterns and build coping mechanisms.

b. Digital Hygiene Workshops

Just as students learn study skills and time management, they should also learn how to interact healthily with technology. Digital hygiene workshops can teach students how to:

● Set screen boundaries
● Curate emotionally safe feeds
● Use apps that promote mindfulness over comparison

Importantly, these workshops should validate that technology is part of modern life rather than demonizing it. The goal is not to abstain from social media but to engage with it intentionally.

c. Curriculum-Based Emotion Regulation Training

Emotion regulation shouldn't be confined to therapy rooms; it can be woven into the curriculum. First-year seminars or wellness courses can integrate lessons on coping strategies, digital emotion regulation, and emotional intelligence. Peer leaders and RA's (resident advisors) can be trained to recognize digital distress signals, like disappearing from group chats or posting erratically, and offer early support.

Universities can also collaborate with social media companies to pilot student-centered features, such as reminders to take breaks, positive content nudges, or community wellness pages.

4.5 A Human-Centered Future

Ultimately, the challenge is not to choose between logging in and logging off, but to help students create **emotionally sustainable digital lives**. When used mindfully, social media can be a source of humour, solidarity, and even healing. But when used reactively, it can amplify insecurity, anxiety, and emotional turmoil. The difference lies not in the platforms themselves, but in how we prepare students to manage their emotional lives in these always-on environments.

The path forward must be interdisciplinary, combining psychological insight, educational innovation, and digital literacy. By shifting from a reactive model (responding only when a crisis hits) to a proactive one (embedding emotion regulation in daily routines), we can help students not just survive but thrive in their digital worlds.

Future research must deepen its cultural awareness, test evidence-based interventions, and follow students over time. But even now, we can begin transforming the college experience into one where emotional resilience is as valued and nurtured as academic success. Because in a world where every ping matters, so does every feeling behind it.

5 CONCLUSION

In the mosaic of college life, social media is both the background and the frame; it colors how students connect, cope, compare, and communicate. As this narrative review has shown, high levels of social media engagement are not merely a modern distraction; they are intricately tied to emotional well-being. The evidence suggests that frequent, especially passive, engagement with platforms like Instagram and Snapchat may contribute to heightened anxiety and poorer emotion regulation among college students. Yet the picture is not one-dimensional. In some cases, especially when used actively and purposefully, these same platforms can foster emotional resilience, peer support, and self-expression.

The key lies in balance. Students need tools to navigate digital spaces mindfully, recognizing when scrolling offers connection and when it feeds comparison. This calls for more than just screen time limits; it demands emotional literacy, digital self-awareness, and a cultural shift in how we think about online interaction. It also means acknowledging that not every student is affected in the same way. Personality traits like neuroticism, levels of emotional intelligence, and contextual factors such as academic pressure all shape the emotional consequences of digital life.

A recurring insight across the literature is that the relationship between social media use and emotion regulation is both reciprocal and dynamic. Not only does social media influence how students feel, but how they feel also influences how they engage online. Students experiencing heightened anxiety, for instance, may be more likely to retreat into endless scrolling as a way to escape their emotional discomfort. But this very behavior can exacerbate the problem, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy, fear of missing out (FOMO), and emotional burnout. What begins as a coping mechanism becomes a contributing factor.

Conversely, those with stronger emotion regulation skills are often better equipped to engage with social media constructively. They are more likely to curate their feeds, seek out supportive communities, and disconnect when online spaces become overwhelming. This finding highlights the importance of fostering emotional intelligence and resilience within the student population, not just to buffer the impacts of social media, but to empower more thoughtful, intentional engagement with it.

The contradictions in current findings remind us that no one-size-fits-all explanation exists. Social media's effects vary widely based on the user's intent, emotional baseline, peer environment, and cultural context. For some students, particularly those who are introverted or socially anxious, digital platforms offer a haven, a space where they can express themselves freely and receive validation, but they might struggle to find it offline. For others, these same platforms become echo chambers of insecurity, where every image and update feels like a referendum on their worth.

We also must recognize that not all platforms operate in the same way. Instagram's visual culture of idealized aesthetics is different from Reddit's community-based dialogue or Twitter's fast-paced commentary. Each platform has its own emotional texture, and students' responses to them are equally nuanced. Recognizing these differences can help researchers and practitioners avoid overgeneralization and tailor interventions to the specific dynamics of the platforms students use most.

Despite these insights, there remain significant gaps in our understanding. As previously noted, the lack of longitudinal and experimental research limits our ability to draw firm causal conclusions. Cross-sectional studies are useful for identifying correlations, but they can't tell us whether social media causes emotional dysregulation or if students already struggling with emotion regulation are simply more drawn to digital distraction. We need more studies that follow students over the course of semesters or academic years to map the evolving interplay between their digital behaviors and emotional development.

Moreover, current research often underrepresents non-Western perspectives. Many of the emotional dynamics at play in online spaces are deeply influenced by cultural norms, family expectations, and societal values. In countries where mental health issues carry significant stigma, students may be less likely to seek help or express distress openly, both offline and online. Their emotion regulation strategies might therefore differ from those

observed in Western contexts, where self-expression is more culturally accepted. Including diverse voices in research isn't just about fairness, it's about generating insights that are truly comprehensive and applicable across global contexts.

The absence of intervention studies is another critical blind spot. We have enough descriptive data to understand the problem; now we need practical solutions. What kinds of digital literacy programs actually improve emotion regulation? How can universities implement these at scale without overwhelming already-burdened counseling services? What role can tech companies play in designing platforms that support rather than sabotage emotional well-being? These are the questions future researchers must tackle.

At the institutional level, the implications are both urgent and actionable. Universities must recognize that digital life is an integral part of the student experience and address it accordingly in their mental health strategies. Counseling centers can begin by incorporating questions about digital behavior into intake assessments. Doing so not only provides therapists with a fuller picture of the student's emotional world but also normalizes discussion of online experiences as part of mental health care.

Digital hygiene workshops should also become a staple of student orientation and wellness programs. These sessions can teach students how to recognize emotionally taxing online patterns, how to detox from platforms in healthy ways, and how to use tools like muting, filtering, or app timers to protect their mental space. Just as students learn to manage their time and workload, they should also be empowered to manage their emotional bandwidth in digital spaces.

Additionally, emotion regulation skills should be woven into the academic curriculum. First-year seminars and general education courses provide an excellent opportunity to integrate these concepts. Lessons on coping mechanisms, mindfulness, and reflective writing not only enhance students' academic success but also equip them with lifelong emotional tools. Peer mentoring and residence life programs can also reinforce these lessons in informal settings, creating a campus culture that values emotional health as much as academic achievement.

Finally, universities should explore partnerships with technology companies to co-create student-focused digital tools. These could include in-app prompts that encourage breaks, algorithmic tweaks that reduce exposure to harmful content, or anonymous reporting systems for online harassment. While no single solution will eliminate the emotional challenges of social media, a coordinated, multi-level approach can significantly reduce harm and promote healthier digital engagement. In the end, this review affirms a simple yet powerful truth: social media is here to stay, and its impact on students' emotional lives is too significant to ignore. But rather than framing it solely as a threat, we can begin to see it as an opportunity. With the right support systems, educational strategies, and research efforts, social media can become a space not just for scrolling but for healing, growth, and meaningful connection. In a world where the digital and emotional are increasingly inseparable, helping students regulate one may be the key to strengthening the other.

REFERENCES

1. American College Health Association. (2023). *National College Health Assessment: Undergraduate student reference group executive summary Spring 2023.* Silver Spring, MD: American College Health Association.
2. Bayer, J. B., Ellison, N. B., Schoenebeck, S. Y., & Falk, E. B. (2016). Sharing the small moments: Ephemeral social interaction on Snapchat. *Information, Communication & Society, 19*(7), 956–977. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1084349
3. Burnell, K., George, M. J., Vollet, J. W., Ehrenreich, S. E., & Underwood, M. K. (2019). Passive social networking site use and well-being: The mediating roles of social comparison and rumination. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 22*(11), 685–691.
4. Casale, S., & Fioravanti, G. (2018). Why is social networking problematic for some individuals? The role of social anxiety and the fear of missing out in problematic social networking. *Current Psychology.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-018-9940-8
5. Center for Collegiate Mental Health. (2023). *2023 annual report* (Publication No. STA 23–01). The Pennsylvania State University, Counseling and Psychological Services.
6. Chang, T. K., & Law, J. C. (2021). Peer mentoring, study habits, and digital wellbeing: Qualitative insights from university students. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 58*(2), 145–161.
7. Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12*(4), 1143–1168. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x
8. Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., & Halliwell, E. (2015). Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood. *Body Image, 13*, 38–45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2014.12.003
9. Flett, J. A. M., Hayne, H., & Riordan, B. C. (2020). Instagram journaling: Using narratives for self-regulation and emotional well-being. *Journal of Media Psychology, 22*(1), 12–25.
10. Frison, E., & Eggermont, S. (2016). Exploring the relationships between different types of Facebook use, perceived online social support, and adolescents' depressed mood. *Journal of Adolescence, 52*, 1–10.

Open Access

11. Gioia, F., Rega, V., & Boursier, V. (2021). Problematic internet use and emotional dysregulation among young people: A literature review. *Clinical Neuropsychiatry, 18*(1), 41–54.

12. Gross, J. J. (1998). The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review. *Review of General Psychology, 2*(3), 271–299. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.271

13. Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Rapson, R. L. (1994). *Emotional contagion*. Cambridge University Press.

14. Huang, C. (2017). Time spent on social network sites and psychological well-being: A meta-analysis. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 20*(6), 346–354.

15. Keles, B., McCrae, N., & Grealish, A. (2020). A systematic review: The influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 274*, 763–774. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.05.081

16. Kim, H. S., & Sherman, D. K. (2007). "Express yourself": Culture and the effect of self-expression on choice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.1.1

17. Kramer, A. D. I., Guillory, J. E., & Hancock, J. T. (2014). Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 111*(24), 8788–8790. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1320040111

18. Kwan, I., Dickson, K., Richardson, M., Thomas, J., Sutcliffe, K., Rees, R., Stansfield, C., Clarke, A., & Kavanagh, J. (2020). Cyberbullying and children and young people's mental health: A systematic map of systematic reviews. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 52*, 101418.

19. Levenson, J. C., Shensa, A., Sidani, J. E., Colditz, J. B., & Primack, B. A. (2017). Social media use before bed and sleep disturbance among young adults in the United States: A nationally representative study. *Preventive Medicine, 96*, 73–78.

20. Li, R., Wang, Y., & Chen, L. (2022). Social networking site use, anxiety, and materialism among Chinese undergraduates: The moderating role of gender. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 16*(1), Article 4.

21. Lopez, S. J., & Snyder, C. R. (2019). Enhancing psychological strengths in college students: The role of emotional intelligence training. *Journal of College Student Development, 60*(3), 345–360.

22. Marengo, D., Longobardi, C., Fabris, M. A., & Settanni, M. (2021). The association between problematic social media use and emotional dysregulation among adolescents. *Personality and Individual Differences, 184*, Article 111139. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111139

23. Marino, C., Gini, G., Vieno, A., & Spada, M. M. (2018). A comprehensive meta-analysis on problematic Facebook use. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 31*, 76–85. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.03.015

24. Mark, G., Gudith, D., & Klocke, U. (2008). The cost of interrupted work: More speed and stress. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 107–110). https://doi.org/10.1145/1357054.1357072

25. Nguyen, T. T., De la Rosa, B., & Grzeskowiak, P. (2021). Emotional intelligence as a buffer against social media–induced stress in college students. *Journal of American College Health, 69*(7), 786–793. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1706538

26. Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (1991). Responses to depression and their effects on the duration of depressive episodes. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 100*(4), 569–582.

27. Ophir, E., Nass, C., & Wagner, A. D. (2009). Cognitive control in media multitaskers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106*(37), 15583–15587. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0903620106

28. Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(4), 1841–1848. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.014

29. Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality, 9*(3), 185–211.

30. Schutte, N. S., Malouff, J. M., & Thorsteinsson, E. B. (2013). Increasing emotional intelligence through training: Current status and future directions. *The International Journal of Emotional Education, 5*(1), 56–72.

31. Sweller, J. (1988). Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning. *Cognitive Science, 12*(2), 257–285.

32. Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2014). NetTweens: The Internet and identity, friendships, and body image among tweens. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 34*(7), 776–795. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431614522083

33. Verduyn, P., Ybarra, O., Résibois, M., Jonides, J., & Kross, E. (2017). Do social network sites enhance or undermine subjective well-being? A critical review. *Social Issues and Policy Review, 11*(1), 274–302. https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12033

34. Wang, J. L., Jackson, L. A., Zhang, D. J., & Su, Z. Q. (2017). The relationships among the Big Five personality factors, shyness, narcissism, loneliness, and social networking site usage: A structural equation modelling analysis. *Personality and Individual Differences, 105*, 215–221. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.10.058

35. Woods, H. C., & Scott, H. (2016). #Sleepyteens: Social media use in adolescence is associated with poor sleep quality, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. *Journal of Adolescence, 51*, 41–49.

36. Yamada, S., & Peterson, E. (2019). Cultural differences in emotional relief following social media self-disclosure among U.S. and Japanese college students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 70*, 57–68.