

## Social Media Addiction and Learned Helplessness in Young Adults of South India

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Social media addiction has an impact on behavior and changes the lifestyle of an individual to such an extent that they are helpless to control the situation. This study investigates the association between social media addiction and learned helplessness in young adults. Data is collected through an online survey method from a sample of 171 young adults between 18-25 years. The statistical analysis of the data reveals a significant correlation between learned helplessness and social media addiction in young adults. Preventive steps and intervention strategies can be accordingly designed for social media addiction by considering this factor.

**Keywords:** social media addiction, learned helplessness, relationship, young adults, South India

Social media has changed the ways of thinking, feeling, behaving, and communicating with others. Merriam-Webster (2024) defines it as “a form of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content.” In India, social media usage has increased significantly, with the most popular platforms being Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Pinterest, WhatsApp, MX Taka Tak, Mojo, and Skype. However, its overuse can lead to mental health problems including anxiety, eating disorders, and depression. This is also evident in the various research studies conducted for the past few years.

The idea of learned helplessness, first conceptualized by Overmier and Seligman (1967) can be understood as a phenomenon in which a person ultimately stops trying to overcome a constant negative and uncontrollable situation. Numerous studies have examined learned helplessness and variables such as procrastination, self-concept, and academic satisfaction. Recent

research has focused on the relationship between learned helplessness and various addictions.

For instance, Wang *et al.* (2017) looked at the association between coping strategies, dysfunctional attitudes, and learned helplessness in 623 men with substance use disorders. It was found that the male substance abusers showed maladjusted attitudes and learned helplessness. Furthermore, they were significant predictors of the coping styles of these individuals. Nisbet and Kamenchuk (2021) conducted a study to understand how media impacts learned helplessness within an individual. They examined the relationship between news and digital media endorsement of false information in an authoritarian setting. Their findings suggest that supporting incorrect beliefs regarding COVID-19 is more likely when one has informational learned helplessness. It demonstrates how people who feel “helpless” are particularly susceptible to the widespread dissemination of erroneous and misleading information. People rely on digital media which can

potentially be a source of misleading information in authoritarian settings that strengthen incorrect beliefs.

However, there is less research on the influence of excess social media usage on learned helplessness except for Son and Heo (2020) who examined helplessness, and loneliness in college students using social media since the pandemic in 2019. The findings showed that the student's feelings of helplessness increased as their motivation and frequency for using YouTube increased. However, the student's strong motivations for using Instagram to connect with people led to minimal degrees of loneliness. The study concluded that college students may become "YouTube heavy users" who feel helpless and lonely as a result of the pandemic.

Thus, technology has become an undeniable part of our lives and impacts our health. This is quite evident with the prevalence of various technology-related disorders such as internet addiction disorder and the inclusion of internet gaming addiction disorder in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). The emergence of numerous social media platforms has led to mental health problems, particularly among youth, which are harming their personal, vocational, and social lives. In the aftermath of the pandemic in 2019, the use of social media platforms has skyrocketed, leading the contemporary youth population to get addicted to it. Thus, the present research aims to find if there is an association between social media addiction and learned helplessness in young adults of the age range of 18 and 25 years.

### **Objectives**

The study has the following objectives:

1. To investigate if there is an association between social media addiction and learned helplessness.

2. To investigate if there is a relationship between the relapse sub-scale and learned helplessness.
3. To find if there is a relationship between the mood modification sub-scale and learned helplessness.
4. To observe if there is an association between the learned helplessness and occupation sub-scale.
5. To explore the relationship between conflict sub-scale and learned helplessness.

### **Hypotheses**

The hypotheses are as follows:

- H<sub>1</sub>: A significant relationship between social media addiction and learned helplessness will be found.
- H<sub>2</sub>: A significant relationship between the occupation sub-scale and learned helplessness will be found.
- H<sub>3</sub>: A significant relationship between the mood modification sub-scale and learned helplessness will be found.
- H<sub>4</sub>: A significant relationship between the relapse sub-scale and learned helplessness will be found.
- H<sub>5</sub>: A significant relationship between the conflict sub-scale and learned helplessness will be found.

### **Method**

#### **Sample**

The sample consisted of college and university students studying at different levels and fields of education. The sample size was 171 and the age range of the participants was 18-25 years. Data was collected using convenience and snowball sampling techniques.

## Tools

*The Learned Helplessness Scale* (Quinless & Nelson, 1988) assesses the level of learned helplessness. It is a 20-item, four-point Likert scale with an alpha reliability of 0.85.

*The Social Media Addiction Scale* (Tutgun-Ünal and Deniz, 2015) has four sub-scales – “occupation, mood modification, conflict, and relapse.” It is a five-point Likert scale with 41 items and an alpha reliability of 0.97.

## Procedure

Data was collected using the cross-sectional design through the survey method. Google Forms were used which had three sections. The first section of the form collected the socio-demographic data of the respondent and the pattern of social media usage during the pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. The other two sections comprised the two questionnaires to evaluate learned helplessness and social media addiction, respectively.

## Ethical Considerations

The informed consent was taken from the participants and they were explained that their data would be kept confidential. Debriefing was also conducted for the participants so that they were aware of the intention of the study.

## Results

The findings investigate the association between social media addiction and learned helplessness in university students. The 29<sup>th</sup> version of SPSS was used to examine the collected data. The descriptive statistics were calculated for the socio-demographic data.

Spearman correlation was used to find a relationship between the two variables as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation between learned helplessness and social media addiction

Variable	M	SD	1	2
1. Learned Helplessness	45.86	5.94	-	0.38**
2. Social media Addiction	110.07	32.04	0.38**	-

\*\*significant at 0.01 level (two-tailed)

The above table shows that a significant correlation was found between the two variables. Spearman correlation was further calculated for learned helplessness and the four sub-scales of the social media addiction scale, i.e., (a) occupation; (b) mood modification; (c) relapse; and (d) conflict as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation between learned helplessness and social media addiction sub-scales

Variable	M	SD	1
1. Learned Helplessness	45.86	5.94	-
a. Sub-scale 1 - Occupation	37.36	10.096	0.20
b. Sub-scale 2 – Mood modification	15.04	5.26	0.25**
c. Sub-scale 3 - Relapse	13.02	5.02	0.35**
d. Sub-scale 4 - Conflict	44.64	5.94	0.43**

\*\*significant at 0.01 level (two-tailed)

The above table shows that no significant correlation was found only for the occupation sub-scale.

## Discussion

The research study aimed to investigate the potential association between the selected variables: social media addiction and learned helplessness. SPSS version 29 was used for the quantitative data analysis. The socio-demographic data shows that the highest percentage of the participants was 22 years old (20.5%) whereas the lowest percentage was 24 years old (2.9 %). Most of the participants were females (69.6%) and graduate students (68.4%) who belonged to

the economically backward classes (38%). The majority of the participants (31.6%) spent 3 – 4 hours on social media in pre-COVID times and 64.9% of the participants perceived that their social media use increased post-pandemic.

The study's first objective was to investigate the association between social media addiction and learned helplessness. Bivariate correlation analysis was used to assess the data of 171 sample students. The results (Table 1) revealed a significant positive correlation between the variables among the students (Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2021). Yet, the research also revealed that the intensity of the link is low, implying that as social media addiction increases, there is a slight increase in an individual's learned helplessness.

The second objective was to observe a possible significant relationship between the relapse sub-scale and learned helplessness. The findings indeed showed a significant and positive correlation between them (Table 2). Consequently, the analysis supports the alternative hypothesis which states the presence of a significant relationship between learned helplessness and relapse. Nonetheless, the strength of the association between the variables is low, indicating a slight increase in learned helplessness with an increase in the individual's incapacity to self-control his social media usage pattern. This pattern can be assumed to further contribute to the cycle of relapse in which sentiments of helplessness and inability to control one's behavior led to relapse into the old social media usage pattern.

The study's third objective was to find any probable significant relationship between the mood modification sub-scale and learned helplessness. The findings (Table 2) showed a significant and positive correlation between the mood modification sub-scale and learned helplessness (Son & Heo, 2020). Thus, the

study's findings support the alternate hypothesis which stated the presence of a significant relationship between mood modification and learned helplessness. However, the strength of the association between the variables is low. This indicates that with an increase in the modifications in mood due to social media usage patterns, there is a small increase in learned helplessness within the individual. The fourth objective was to observe the significant association between the occupation sub-scale and learned helplessness. The findings showed no correlation between relapse and learned helplessness (Table 2), thus rejecting the alternative hypothesis.

The last and fifth objective of the study was to explore the likely significant relationship between conflict sub-scale and learned helplessness. The findings showed a significantly positive correlation between conflict sub-scale and learned helplessness (Table 2), thus supporting the alternative hypothesis. The findings also showed that the correlational strength between the variables was moderate. This data indicates that with an increase in the negative effect of social media usage patterns on an individual's life, there is a moderate increase in learned helplessness within the individual.

Thus, it can be concluded that an increase in excess social media usage and its activities has a detrimental impact on an individual's life, leading to mood modification (often leading to negative emotions such as frustration, anger, helplessness, etc.). This trend eventually leads to the individual's incapacity to control the impulse to use social media and, as a result, a relapse into old social media usage behaviors. The recurrent relapses and mood changes cause the individual to believe, they have no control over their behavior, resulting in learned helplessness. And the cycle is repeated by these acquired helpless ideas. Yet, recurrent obsession and mood modification can also

contribute to learned helplessness, increasing the likelihood of relapse in the individual. This cycle is depicted in Figure 1.

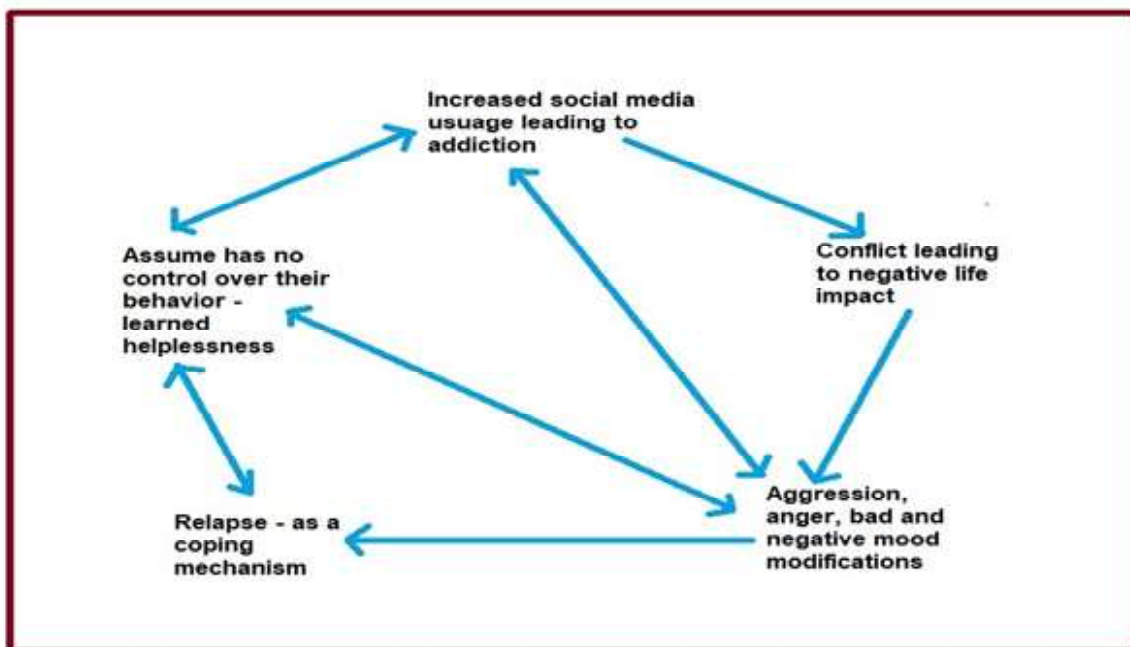


Figure 1. Dynamics in social media addiction and learned helplessness relationship

### Conclusion

Thus, a significant and low positive correlation between social media addiction and learned helplessness was found from the above analysis and observations. A significant correlation was also found between the three sub-scales and learned helplessness. However, the strengths of the correlation varied across the sub-scales. The small sample size is the limitation of the study which might influence the outcome of the study. The current research has 171 individuals, limiting the use of other statistical tools, which gives a comprehensive knowledge of the causal link between variables. Another weakness of the study is the type of sampling used. Data collection techniques used by the researcher included convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Due to the time constraints on data collection, these sampling techniques were chosen instead of random sampling. However, since this was a preliminary study,

the principal objective of the researchers was to validate the association between the target variables.

The implication of the preliminary study is that its findings show an association between the two variables within the Indian context. Thus, prevention and therapeutic interventions can be planned accordingly. Further studies on the role of social media addiction on people's mental and cognitive well-being across age groups will further help in this endeavor. The present study provides quantitative evidence of a link between social media addiction and learned helplessness. Qualitative studies can be taken up on the topic. Future research should focus on the cause-and-effect relationship between these factors, as well as investigate the links between preoccupation, relapse, mood change, and learned helplessness. Further investigations can be conducted to determine whether social media addiction should be classified as a separate condition in the

international diagnostic criteria. Finally, theoretical formulations on social media addiction will help raise awareness about its increasing prevalence in society. Thus, though the present study contributes and finds a low correlation between social media addiction and learned helplessness, further in-depth research is required in the field.

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