

INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HARMFUL SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT AND INCIDENCES OF SUICIDAL THOUGHTS MODERATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT

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Abstract

The widespread use of social media has increased concerns regarding the psychological effects of exposure to harmful online content, particularly its association with suicidal thoughts among young adults. The present study investigated the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts while examining the moderating role of perceived stress. A quantitative, correlational research design was employed, and a convenience sample of (N=224) university students aged 18 years and above was recruited. Data were collected using standardized instruments, including the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS), Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). Descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation, independent-samples t-test, and hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25. The findings indicated that all study measures demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .717-.915$). Correlation analysis revealed that harmful social media content was significantly associated with suicidal thoughts, perceived stress, and perceived social support. No significant gender differences were observed across the major study variables. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that harmful social media content and perceived stress significantly predicted suicidal thoughts, accounting for 40% of the variance in suicidal ideation. However, the interaction between harmful social media content and perceived stress was not significant, indicating that perceived stress did not moderate the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts. The findings highlight the detrimental psychological impact of harmful social media content and underscore the importance of developing interventions that promote safer online environments, digital literacy, and early mental health support for young adults.

Keywords: Harmful social media content, social media use, suicidal thoughts, perceived stress, young adults, mental health.

Introduction

The widespread adoption of social media has transformed the way individuals communicate, access information, and interact with society. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Snapchat have become integral to everyday life, particularly among adolescents and young adults. These platforms facilitate communication, education, entertainment, and social networking; however, they have also created opportunities for exposure to harmful online content. Harmful social media content including cyberbullying, hate speech, violent imagery, misinformation, self-harm and suicide-related material, and online harassment has emerged as a growing public health concern because of its potential impact on psychological well-being (Keles et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

While social media can promote social connectedness and emotional support, increasing evidence suggests that repeated exposure to harmful content may contribute to emotional distress, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts among vulnerable individuals.

The Internet is a double-edged sword: while moderate use can be helpful, excessive and uncontrolled use can exacerbate a number of maladaptive issues, including academic failure, social withdrawal and isolation, negative emotions (such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness), delinquencies (such as lying, hostility), a decline in quality of life (such as lower perceived well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction), and even psychiatric disorders (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011; Kim & Davis, 2009, Li et al., 2014). This is especially true during adolescence, if certain predisposing personal and contextual factors are present (Pace et al., 2014). Nevertheless, research indicates that the internet and social media are double edged swords and can provide both benefits and challenges (Robinson et al. 2016; Fu et al. 2013). In order to prevent teenage Internet addiction, it is imperative to understand the dangerous and protective elements. It goes without saying that negative content, such as false information and the incitement of violence, has infested social media sites. The ubiquity of detrimental social media content has drawn a lot of attention lately, especially in light of its possible effects on mental health outcomes like suicide ideation.

Recent global statistics indicate that social media adoption continues to increase despite approaching saturation in many developed regions. According to the Digital 2025 Global Overview Report, approximately 5.24 billion active social media user identities were recorded worldwide at the beginning of 2025, representing 63.9% of the global population. During the preceding year alone, more than 206 million new users joined social media platforms, reflecting an annual growth rate of approximately 4.1%. Furthermore, more than 5.56 billion people were using the internet globally, indicating that social media has become an almost universal component of internet activity. On average, internet users spend 2 hours and 21 minutes per day on social networking platforms, highlighting their central role in daily routines and social interactions.

Cyberbullying is a pervasive, damaging kind of online harassment that can have major psychological repercussions. In extreme circumstances, it raises the possibility of suicidal thoughts. It causes anxiety, sadness, low self-esteem, alienation from learning environments through absenteeism, and lower academic performance over time. A comprehensive educational, informative, and intervention strategy that helps victims of cyberbullying and actively strives to avoid it in our online society is required. Policy can be shaped to lessen the harm caused by this increasingly common type of bullying by taking into account the mental health issues linked to cyberbullying (Tang et al., 2016).

Cyberbullying is associated with poor psychological health (Smith et al., 2008) the problem of bullying via the internet, a common and distressing sort of online abuse, has grown in prevalence with the rise of social media-mediated communication. Information spreads swiftly in cyberspace, whereas conventional bullying is limited by time and geography. The anonymity and platform of social media provide these attackers with a voice, giving them an ongoing presence in your life, which is why this type of abuse never stops. Cyberbullying imposes an immense psychological burden on the victim, with a complex sting to its hold. emotional contagion spreads beyond the victim of cyber bullying and affects his family and friends. Parents feel terrible, helpless, and even furious when they try to help their children deal with the problem of bullying. This will leave victims' friends feeling helpless; it will also lead them to worry, because

any parent who has witnessed the impact of bullying on a loved one understands how distressing and anxiety-inducing this experience can be. Cyber bullying's ripple effects strain connections and cause tension in the victim's support network, resulting in a fearful environment for everyone else (Primack et al., 2017).

Suicide represents one of the leading causes of preventable death worldwide and poses a significant challenge to global public health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), more than 700,000 individuals die by suicide each year, with many more experiencing suicidal ideation and attempting suicide. Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable because they experience substantial developmental, academic, interpersonal, and psychological challenges while simultaneously spending increasing amounts of time on digital platforms. Exposure to harmful online content during these critical developmental stages may intensify feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, social isolation, and psychological distress, thereby increasing susceptibility to suicidal thoughts.

Recent technological developments have substantially changed the digital environment, enabling users to rapidly create, share, and consume information without geographical limitations. Although these advancements have improved access to educational resources and social support, they have also facilitated the widespread dissemination of harmful material. Suicide-related posts, self-harm images, cyberbullying, online abuse, and violent content can normalize maladaptive behaviors and negatively influence vulnerable users through mechanisms such as social comparison, emotional contagion, and suicide contagion. Previous studies have demonstrated that repeated exposure to suicide-related online content is associated with increased suicidal ideation, self-harm behaviors, and psychological distress, particularly among adolescents and emerging adults (John et al., 2018; Keles et al., 2020).

Harmful social media content encompasses digital material that threatens an individual's psychological, emotional, or social well-being. Such content may include cyberbullying, harassment, discrimination, hate speech, graphic violence, misinformation, self-harm promotion, and suicide-related discussions. These experiences often contribute to feelings of rejection, helplessness, and emotional dysregulation, increasing the likelihood of adverse mental health outcomes. Researchers have consistently reported that exposure to cyberbullying and harmful online interactions predicts higher levels of depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation, emphasizing the importance of examining specific forms of harmful content rather than general social media use (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between harmful social media content and incidences of suicidal thoughts while examining the moderating role of perceived social support among young adults. By identifying perceived social support as a potential protective factor, the study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on digital mental health and suicide prevention.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is primarily grounded in the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (ITS) proposed by Joiner (2005) and supported by the Stress-Buffering Hypothesis of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how harmful social media content may contribute to suicidal thoughts and how perceived social support may mitigate this relationship.

The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide posits that suicidal ideation develops when individuals experience two critical psychological states: thwarted belongingness, characterized

by feelings of social isolation and disconnection, and perceived burdensomeness, the belief that one is a burden to others (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010). Exposure to harmful social media content including cyberbullying, online harassment, hate speech, and suicide-related material may intensify these interpersonal experiences by increasing loneliness, rejection, hopelessness, and emotional distress. Consequently, repeated exposure to such content may elevate the risk of suicidal thoughts among vulnerable individuals.

The Stress-Buffering Hypothesis suggests that perceived social support protects individuals from the negative psychological consequences of stressful experiences by providing emotional, informational, and practical resources (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Individuals who perceive strong support from family, friends, and significant others are more likely to cope effectively with adverse online experiences, regulate emotional distress, and seek help when needed. Therefore, perceived social support is expected to weaken the positive association between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts by reducing the adverse psychological impact of harmful online exposure.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, the present study proposes that harmful social media content is positively associated with suicidal thoughts, whereas perceived social support functions as a protective moderator. Specifically, individuals with higher perceived social support are expected to experience fewer suicidal thoughts despite exposure to harmful social media content. Integrating these theories provides a strong conceptual foundation for understanding both the risk and protective factors influencing suicidal ideation in the digital era.

Literature Review

The widespread adoption of social media has fundamentally transformed how individuals communicate, seek information, and maintain interpersonal relationships. Although these platforms facilitate social connectedness and information exchange, they also expose users to a wide range of harmful content that may adversely affect psychological well-being. Harmful social media content refers to digital material that promotes or depicts self-harm, suicide, cyberbullying, hate speech, violence, misinformation, substance abuse, or other behaviors that may negatively influence users' emotions, cognitions, and behaviors. Such content may be explicit, including graphic images and videos of self-injury, or implicit, where harmful behaviors are normalized, romanticized, or indirectly encouraged through memes, narratives, or online communities (Khasawneh et al., 2022).

A comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis by Nesi et al. (2021) synthesized findings from 61 studies investigating social media use and self-injurious thoughts and behaviors. The review demonstrated that problematic social media use, cyber-victimization, and engagement with suicide-related online content were consistently associated with suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and non-suicidal self-injury. In contrast, general frequency of social media use showed little or no significant association with suicidal thoughts, highlighting that specific online experiences are more predictive of suicide risk than overall usage duration.

John Smith, (2023) was studied on "The Dark Side of Social Media: A Review of Harmful Content and its Effects on Users". This review summarizes current studies on the negative consequences of toxic content on social media users' mental health and wellbeing. The report draws attention to a number of negative content types, such as hate speech, misinformation, cyber bullying, and graphic material. It looks at how exposure to such material affects people psychologically and emotionally, including how it might lead to stress, anxiety, sadness, and low self-esteem. The review also looks at the moderators and mediators, such as

age, gender, social support, and coping mechanisms that affect the association between exposure to hazardous information and its effects.

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates an inverse relationship between perceived social support and suicidal thoughts. In a community-based survey conducted in Japan, individuals reporting greater perceived social support, particularly from family members, experienced significantly lower levels of suicidal ideation than those with inadequate support. The study further revealed that dissatisfaction with available social support was associated with greater severity of suicidal thoughts, emphasizing that the quality of perceived support may be more important than the quantity of social relationships (Endo et al., 2014).

More recently, a comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis synthesizing 118 epidemiological studies involving more than 690,000 participants reported a significant inverse association between perceived social support and suicidal behaviors. Higher perceived social support was associated with lower odds of suicidal ideation, suicide planning, suicide attempts, and suicide mortality, confirming that social support functions as a robust protective factor across diverse populations and cultural contexts (Darvishi et al., 2024).

Similarly, another recent systematic review and meta-analysis focusing on university students demonstrated a moderate negative association between perceived social support and suicidal ideation. Family support emerged as the strongest protective source, followed by support from friends and significant others. The findings also suggested that this protective relationship was consistent across Asian and non-Asian countries, indicating the universal importance of social connectedness during emerging adulthood (Chen et al., 2026).

Clinical investigations have also highlighted the importance of perceived social support among psychiatric populations. Sparks et al. (2023) found that lower perceived social support was associated with greater distress related to suicidal ideation among psychiatric inpatients, with thwarted interpersonal needs partially explaining this relationship. These findings provide empirical support for interpersonal models of suicide and emphasize the significance of strengthening supportive relationships in suicide prevention programs.

Research Gap

Despite growing evidence linking harmful social media content to adverse mental health outcomes, several important research gaps remain. Most previous studies have focused on overall social media use rather than specific harmful content, such as cyberbullying, suicide-related posts, hate speech, and violent material. Moreover, existing research has primarily examined direct associations with suicidal thoughts, while the protective role of psychosocial factors has received limited attention. Although perceived social support is recognized as a significant protective factor against suicidal ideation, few studies have investigated its moderating role in the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts. Additionally, the majority of empirical evidence originates from Western countries, limiting its applicability to collectivistic societies such as Pakistan, where family support and social relationships may influence psychological outcomes differently. Therefore, the present study addresses these gaps by examining whether perceived social support moderates the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts among Pakistani young adults, providing culturally relevant evidence for suicide prevention and digital mental health interventions.

Objectives

1. To determine the relationship between harmful social media content and incidence of suicidal thoughts
2. To determine whether there is a link or cause-and-effect relationship between exposures to dangerous information on social media and the appearance or rise in suicide thoughts.
3. To determine the moderation relationship of social support between harmful social media content and incidence of suicidal thoughts
4. To determine whether the availability or strength of social support influences how damaging social media content affects suicidal ideation.

Hypotheses

H1: Harmful social media content is positively associated with incidences of suicidal thoughts among young adults.

H2: Perceived social support is negatively associated with incidences of suicidal thoughts among young adults.

H3: Perceived social support moderates the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts.

H4: There are significant gender differences in harmful social media use, suicidal thoughts, perceived stress, and perceived social support among young adults.

H4: There were positive association between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts is weaker among individuals reporting higher levels of perceived social support.

Method

This study employed a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the relationship between exposure to harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts, with perceived social support as a moderating variable. A convenience sampling technique was used to recruit (N=224) social media users aged 18 years and above from university settings. This population was selected because young adults are among the most active users of social media and are particularly vulnerable to the psychological effects of harmful online content. Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire distributed in both paper-based and online formats to maximize participation. Before participation, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and provided written informed consent. The questionnaire comprised demographic information and standardized measures assessing exposure to harmful social media content, perceived social support, and suicidal thoughts.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS-v25 Statistics. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and study variables, while Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among the variables. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was subsequently conducted to test the study hypotheses and determine whether perceived social support moderated the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts by including the interaction term between the predictor and moderator. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB), and all research procedures complied with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Given the sensitive nature of the research, information regarding available

mental health support services was provided to participants should they experience any emotional distress during or after completing the survey.

Measures

Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS)

The Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS) was developed by Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright, and Johnson (2013) to assess the extent to which social media is integrated into individuals' daily routines and social interactions. The scale consists of 10-items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating greater integration of social media into everyday life. The SMUIS comprises two subscales: Social Integration and Emotional Connection (SIEC; 6 items), which measures emotional attachment to social media and its role in social relationships, and Integration into Social Routines (ISR; 4 items), which assesses the extent to which social media is incorporated into daily activities and routines. The original study reported satisfactory internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .91 for the overall scale, .89 for the SIEC subscale, and .81 for the ISR subscale, demonstrating good reliability and construct validity.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was developed by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, and Farley (1988) to measure individuals' perceived availability of social support from different sources. The scale contains 12 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate greater perceived social support. The MSPSS comprises three subscales: Family Support (4 items), Friends Support (4 items), and Significant Others Support (4 items). The scale has demonstrated excellent psychometric properties across diverse cultural populations. In the original validation study, the overall scale showed excellent internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .88, while the subscales demonstrated alpha coefficients ranging from .85 to .91, indicating high reliability and strong construct validity.

Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ)

The Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ) was developed by Reynolds (1988) to assess the frequency and severity of suicidal thoughts among adolescents and young adults. The original SIQ consists of 30 items, whereas a shorter version, the SIQ-JR, contains 15-items. Respondents indicate how often they have experienced each suicidal thought during the past month using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (I never had this thought) to 6 (Almost every day). Higher scores reflect greater severity of suicidal ideation. The SIQ is a unidimensional measure and therefore does not contain subscales. The original validation reported excellent psychometric properties, with a Cronbach's alpha ranging from .94 to .97, excellent test-retest reliability, and strong evidence of convergent and criterion validity, making it one of the most widely used measures of suicidal ideation in clinical and research settings.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10)

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) to assess the degree to which individuals perceive situations in their lives as stressful during the previous month. The most commonly used version, the PSS-10, consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (Very Often). Four positively worded items (Items 4, 5, 7, and 8) are reverse scored before calculating the total score, with higher scores indicating greater perceived stress. Although originally developed as a single-factor measure, subsequent research has identified two dimensions: Perceived Helplessness (6 items)

and Perceived Self-Efficacy (4 items). The original study reported satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .78 to .91 across different populations, while subsequent studies have consistently supported its reliability and validity in both clinical and community samples.

Results

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of sample in the study (N=224)

Categories	M(SD)	f(%)
Gender	1.50(.501)	
Male		112(50.0)
Female		112(50.0)
Age	1.77(.654)	
18-24		79(35.3)
25-34		117(52.2)
35- Above		28(12.5)
Socio-Economic Status	2.13(.616)	
Low		30(13.4)
Middle		136(60.7)
High		58(25.9)
Family System	1.50(.501)	
Nuclear		112(50.0)
Joint		112(50.0)

Note: M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, %= Percentage

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 224 participants. The sample comprised an equal proportion of males (50.0%) and females (50.0%), with most participants aged 25–34 years (52.2%), followed by 18–24 years (35.3%) and 35 years or above (12.5%). The majority belonged to the middle socioeconomic status (60.7%), while 25.9% and 13.4% were from high and low socioeconomic groups, respectively. Participants were equally distributed between nuclear (50.0%) and joint (50.0%) family systems, indicating a balanced demographic composition of the study sample.

Table 2: Psychometric Properties of study variables (N=224).

Variables	M	SD	A	Range
SMU	69.28	26.49	.882	136
IB	18.83	8.56	.736	40
CB	12.00	6.32	.717	24
BB	14.46	8.25	.760	32

CB	24.00	9.98	.764	40
SIQ	73.85	21.50	.914	90
PSS	49.00	14.58	.915	67
SOS	14.26	4.78	.806	20
FS1	14.54	4.90	.831	20
FS2	14.24	4.92	.842	20

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, A= Alpha, SMUS= Social media use scale, IB= Image Based, CB= Comparison Based, BB= Belief Based, CB= Consumption Based, SIQ= Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire, PSS= Perceived Stress Scale, SOS= Significant other Subscale, FS= Family Subscale, FS= Friends Subscale.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and internal consistency of the study variables. The findings indicate that the scales demonstrated good to excellent reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .717 to .915. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) ($\alpha = .915$) and Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ) ($\alpha = .914$) showed excellent internal consistency, while the Social Media Use Scale (SMUS) also demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = .882$). The subscales of social media use and perceived social support exhibited acceptable to good reliability ($\alpha = .717-.842$), indicating that all measures were sufficiently reliable for subsequent statistical analyses.

Table 3: Pearson Product-moment Correlation between study variables (N=224).

Variable	M	SD	SMU	IB	CB	BB	CB	SIQ	PSS	SO	FA1	FA2
SMUS	69.28	26.49	1	.822**	.776**	.776**	.815**	-.50**	-.21**	-.19**	-.21**	-.14*
IB	18.83	8.56		1	.517**	.544**	.548**	-.45**	-.19**	-.158*	-.20**	-.13*
CB	12.00	6.32			1	.538**	.539**	-.44**	-.20**	-.18**	-.19**	-.13*
BB	14.46	8.25				1	.426**	-.40**	-.26**	-.21**	-.21**	-.26**
CB	24.00	9.98					1	-.34**	-.057	-.095	-.089	.052
SIQ	73.85	21.50						1	.47**	.42**	.41**	.40**
PSS	49.00	14.58							1	.88**	.89**	.85**
SO	14.26	4.78								1	.69**	.64**
FS1	14.54	4.90									1	.67**
FS2	14.24	4.92										1

Note: **Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (2 tailed) SMUS= Social media use scale, IB= Image Based, CB= Comparison Based, BB= Belief Based, CB= Consumption Based, SIQ= Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire, PSS= Perceived Stress Scale, SOS= Significant other Subscale, FS= Family Subscale, FS= Friends Subscale.

Table 3 presents the Pearson product-moment correlations among the study variables. Social media use and its subscales were significantly and negatively correlated with suicidal ideation, perceived stress, and perceived social support. Suicidal ideation showed a significant positive correlation with perceived stress and significant negative correlations with all dimensions of perceived social support. Additionally, perceived stress was strongly and positively associated with the perceived social support subscales. Overall, the findings indicate significant interrelationships among the study variables, providing preliminary support for the proposed associations.

Table 4 Independent Sample t-test On the Basis of Gender Differences a Comparison on the study Variables (N=224).

Variable	Male N=112		Female N=112		t	Df	P	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD						
SMU	72.52	27.39	66.04	25.27	1.83	222	.522	- .468	13.41	0.23
IB	19.23	8.87	18.42	8.26	.709	222	.730	- 1.44	3.07	0.09
CB	12.65	6.58	11.34	6.00	1.55	222	.469	- .347	2.97	0.25
BB	15.63	8.64	13.29	7.70	2.13	222	.233	.183	4.49	0.31
CB	25.00	9.87	22.99	10.04	1.50	222	.507	- .614	4.63	0.20
SIQ	73.52	20.71	74.19	22.35	-.233	222	.430	- 6.34	5.00	-0.03
PSS	48.22	13.55	49.78	15.56	-.800	222	.046	5.40	2.28	-0.12
SO	13.82	4.53	14.70	4.99	-1.38	222	.142	- 2.14	.372	-0.20
FA1	14.33	4.55	14.75	5.25	-.649	222	.034	- 1.72	.868	-0.08
FA2	14.26	4.41	14.22	5.41	.064	222	.005	- 1.25	1.34	0.01

Note: $P < .05$, N= Total number, Df= Degree of freedom, P= Level of significance. SMUS= Social media use scale, IB= Image Based, CB= Comparison Based, BB= Belief Based, CB= Consumption Based, SIQ= Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire, PSS= Perceived Stress Scale, SOS= Significant other Subscale, FS= Family Subscale, FS= Friends Subscale.

Table 4 presents the gender differences across the study variables. The findings indicated no statistically significant gender differences in social media use, its subscales, suicidal ideation, or perceived social support ($p > .05$). Although males reported slightly higher mean scores on overall social media use and its dimensions, whereas females reported marginally higher perceived stress and social support, these differences were small, as reflected by negligible to small effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 0.01-0.31$). Overall, the results suggest that the study variables were comparable across male and female participants.

Table 5 Moderation between harmful social media content and incidents of suicidal thoughts and moderating role of perceived social support (N=224).

Variable	B	SE	95% of CI	
			LL	UL
Constant	66.99	9.66	47.94	86.04
SMUS	-0.31	0.12	-0.54	-0.08
PSS	0.63	0.18	0.27	0.98
SMUS × PSS	-0.001	0.002	-0.005	0.004
R²	0.40			
F	49.01			

Mediator= SIQ, SMUS= Social media use scale, PSS= Perceived Stress Scale.

Table 5 presents the moderation analysis examining the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts, with perceived stress as the moderator. The overall regression model was significant, explaining 40% of the variance in suicidal thoughts ($R^2 = .40$, $F = 49.01$). Harmful social media content significantly predicted suicidal thoughts ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < .05$), and perceived stress also emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < .05$). However, the interaction term between harmful social media content and perceived stress was not significant ($\beta = -0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.005, 0.004]$), indicating that perceived stress did not moderate the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts. Therefore, the moderation hypothesis was not supported.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts and explored the moderating role of perceived stress among young adults. The findings revealed that exposure to harmful social media content were significantly associated with suicidal thoughts, supporting the first hypothesis. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that harmful online experiences, including exposure to distressing content and negative social media interactions, contribute to increased psychological distress and suicidal ideation (John et al., 2018; Keles et al., 2020). These results emphasize the potential adverse psychological consequences of harmful social media content and highlight the importance of promoting safer online environments.

The psychometric analyses demonstrated that all study measures possessed acceptable to excellent internal consistency, indicating that the instruments were reliable for assessing the study variables. Correlation analyses further showed significant associations among harmful social media content, suicidal thoughts, perceived stress, and perceived social support, providing support for the proposed theoretical relationships. In addition, no substantial gender differences were observed across the study variables, suggesting that the impact of harmful social media content was relatively comparable among male and female participants.

The moderation analysis indicated that perceived stress significantly predicted suicidal thoughts; however, its interaction with harmful social media content was not significant. Thus, perceived stress did not moderate the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts, leading to the rejection of the moderation hypothesis. This finding suggests that the influence of harmful social media content on suicidal thoughts persists irrespective of individuals' perceived stress levels. Similar findings have been reported by studies demonstrating that problematic social media exposure is associated with poorer mental health outcomes independent of stress levels (Yoon et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings suggest that harmful social media content is an important risk factor for suicidal thoughts among young adults. The study highlights the need for mental health awareness programs, digital literacy initiatives, and interventions aimed at reducing exposure to harmful online content while strengthening psychological resilience and promoting healthy social media use.

Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts, as well as the moderating role of perceived stress among young adults. The findings demonstrated that harmful social media content was significantly associated with suicidal thoughts, indicating that greater exposure to harmful online content is linked to an

increased risk of suicidal ideation. Although perceived stress was a significant predictor of suicidal thoughts, it did not moderate the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts. Additionally, no significant gender differences were observed across the major study variables. Overall, the findings highlight the detrimental impact of harmful social media content on young adults' mental health and underscore the need for interventions that promote safe social media use, digital literacy, and early mental health support to reduce the risk of suicidal thoughts among vulnerable populations

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional correlational design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts. Second, the use of convenience sampling and recruitment from a limited university population restricts the generalizability of the findings to other age groups and community settings. Third, the reliance on self-report measures may have introduced response bias, including social desirability and recall bias. Finally, the study examined perceived stress as a moderator; however, other potential protective factors such as resilience, coping strategies, emotional regulation, and perceived social support may further explain the relationship between harmful social media content and suicidal thoughts.

Suggestions

Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to examine causal relationships and changes over time. Researchers are encouraged to recruit larger and more diverse samples from different educational institutions and community populations to improve generalizability. Future studies should also investigate additional mediating and moderating variables, including perceived social support, resilience, family functioning, and psychological well-being, to better understand the mechanisms underlying suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, intervention-based research focusing on digital literacy, safe social media practices, and mental health promotion is recommended to reduce the adverse psychological effects of harmful online content among young adults.

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