

The impact of news and social media on depression and anxiety among public university students in Dhaka City

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Abstract

In the contemporary digital age, news and social media have become integral components of the daily lives of university students. This study aims to explore the intricate relationship between media exposure, mainly through news and social media platforms, and the frequency of depression and anxiety symptoms among students who are enrolled in public universities in Dhaka City, Bangladesh. For this purpose, 160 students from eight public universities in Dhaka and six mental health professionals were selected using convenience sampling for data collection to explore and gain insights from this relationship. The study involves a mixed-methods approach, linking surveys and interviews with students from various public universities and mental health professionals in Dhaka City. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires to assess the frequency and nature of media exposure, the patterns and frequency of consuming news and social media, and the frequency of experiencing anxiety and depression among the students. At the same time, qualitative interviews provide deeper insights into students' perceptions and professionals' experiences regarding media exposure and mental health. Preliminary findings suggest a complex interplay between media exposure and mental health outcomes. Severe levels of exposure to distressing news content and excessive use of social media platforms are linked with heightened symptoms of depression and anxiety in students. These findings underscore the necessity for media literacy programmes and mental health support services tailored to the unique needs of this demographic. This research argues for the media literacy and coping strategies, shedding light on how students who possess better media literacy skills and healthier coping mechanisms are more resilient to media exposure's negative mental health impacts.

Keywords: Media exposure, mental health, news, social media, depression, anxiety.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed how individuals access and engage with information, making media exposure—through both traditional news outlets and social media platforms—an integral part of daily life. Among university students, particularly those in urban areas such as Dhaka City, the pervasive nature of media can have profound implications for mental health. As they navigate academic pressures, social expectations, and economic constraints, students are increasingly vulnerable to symptoms of depression and anxiety—conditions that have become prevalent in higher education contexts worldwide (WHO, 2023; Islam et al., 2020).

The intersection between media exposure and mental health has attracted growing attention among sociologists, psychologists, and public health researchers (Pantic, 2014; Twenge et al., 2018). While media platforms can function as sources of information, support, and social engagement, an expanding body of literature also highlights their potential to exacerbate negative emotional states. News media's tendency to emphasize distressing content such as disasters, violence, and crises, alongside the curated realities portrayed on social media, may amplify feelings of fear, inadequacy, and hopelessness (Keles et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021). In highly urbanized and densely populated settings such as Dhaka City, where students face immense academic and socioeconomic stressors, the impact of continuous exposure to such content may be particularly severe (Islam et al., 2020).

In the specific context of Dhaka City—one of the most densely populated and fast-paced urban centres in South Asia—the mental well-being of public university students is under increasing scrutiny. These students often face unique challenges, including academic competition, limited access to mental health resources, financial insecurity, and social isolation. When combined with frequent and often unregulated exposure to both traditional and digital media, these factors may elevate psychological distress and contribute to the development or worsening of mental health issues (Chao et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2020).

Existing literature supports the connection between media exposure and mental health challenges. Studies have shown that coverage of traumatic events in the news can heighten feelings of fear, stress, and helplessness (Busso et al., 2014, Dohrenwend et al., 2006), while excessive use of social media has been linked to depression, anxiety, poor sleep, and low self-esteem (Levenson et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2016; Primack et al., 2017). Social media, in particular, fosters environments conducive to harmful social comparison and cyberbullying; however, it can also offer spaces for support, advocacy, and mental health awareness (Chao et al., 2020; Maleeb et al., 2020; Naslund et al., 2016). Positive storytelling and peer-led support networks can foster resilience, promote help-seeking behaviours, and provide a sense of belonging during times of crisis. Hence, the influence of media on mental health is complex and contingent upon various contextual and individual factors.

Despite the global attention to the interplay between media use and mental health, there is a notable gap in empirical research focusing on this issue within the Bangladeshi context, particularly among university students in Dhaka City. This study therefore aims to explore the relationship between news and social media exposure and the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms among students in public universities. By examining this dynamic through a sociological lens, the research seeks to contribute to a better understanding of how media consumption influences student wellbeing and to inform future mental health interventions and media literacy efforts in academic settings.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have found a positive relevance between news media exposure and depression and anxiety symptoms. Dohrenwend et al. (2006) found that participants who reported heightened levels of exposure to the 9/11 terrorist attack in the news media were more likely to develop symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Bickman et al. (2015) established that mobile phone use and TV viewing were connected with depressive symptoms, whereas using computer, listening to music, and playing video game were not problematic. The mobile phone results support evidence that excessive mobile phone users were more likely to suffer from depression, confirming those longitudinal connections with TV watching. The connection between mobile phone use and depression was clear in models relating to baseline levels of depression. The current study adds to existing testimony that these actions add to the increase of depressive symptoms. An outcome for TV viewing was aligned with other findings, revealing a longitudinal relation between watching TV and depressive symptoms. This connection could be confirmed by exposure to TV content—images from programmes and advertisements negatively affecting sensitive viewers or watching violence on television. The study provided proof that mobile phone use was related to the increase in depressive symptoms, thus confirming a connection between watching TV and depression.

Labrague (2014) examined the effects of Facebook usage on teenagers' states of depression, anxiety, and distress in 70 Filipino students using the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS). It was found that, although Facebook use is not directly connected to negative emotive states, time spent on Facebooking increases depression and anxiety scores. Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis (2015) examined the association between time spent on social networking sites and unmet support necessary for mental health, poor self-rated mental health, and reports of psychological anguish and suicidal intentions in 753 Canadian teenagers. The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10) for metering indexes of depression and anxiety found that students with poor mental health might be greater consumers of social networking sites.

Lin et al. (2016) established that people who spent more time on Facebook reported increased levels of depressive symptoms. Similarly, research by Vannucci et al. (2017) stated that higher levels of social media use were connected with heightened levels of anxiety in teenagers. One possible explanation for these findings is that social media use can lead to social comparisons and feelings of inadequacy, as users are often exposed to highly curated and edited representations of other people's lives. Additionally, social media can pave the way to feelings of isolation and solitude, as users may spend more time interacting online than in person with friends and family (Baker & Algorta, 2016).

In a study, Primack et al. (2017) found a significant connection between social media use and depression in young adults. The researchers analyzed the social media use and depression indexes of 1787 individual aged between 19 and 32. They found that those who used social media more regularly had high levels of depression indexes. The study suggests that the constant comparison of the self with others on social media platforms can contribute to depressive symptoms. In addition, Kross et al. (2013) found that high levels of Facebook use was connected with negative wellbeing and increases in depressive symptoms.

Chao et al. (2020) found that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted on people's psychological health worldwide, while media consumption has played a prominent role in shaping individuals' perceptions and emotional responses. Media disclosure of COVID-19-related news or information was linked with increased levels of anxiety and fear among the Chinese population, for example. Constant exposure to alarming statistics, images of healthcare

workers, and stories of suffering could heighten emotional distress. Media use, especially for individuals directly affected by the virus or living in regions with strict lockdown measures, could contribute to psychological stress. However, media platforms were also used to share positive stories of resilience, solidarity, and community support. These stories could serve as protective factors, providing hope and a sense of unity during challenging times. Maleeb et al. (2020) conducted a cross-sectional study on Lebanese adults on problematic social media use and psychic health in which 600 adults participated, with 466 adults completing questionnaires. The research found that higher levels of erratic social media use were significantly connected with heightened depression, anxiety, and sleeplessness, but not distress.

Naslund et al. (2020) found the relevance of social media and mental health is multifaceted, with both conclusive and contradictory aspects. Social media platforms often serve as sources of information and education about mental health issues. The availability of teletherapy and online counselling services through social media platforms has expanded access to mental health care. Nevertheless, social media can be a breeding ground for cyberbullying and harassment, which can have detrimental effects on mental health, especially among teenagers and young adults. The study suggests that the obsessive use of social media, sometimes referred to as social media addiction, can result in time-wasting and neglect of real-life responsibilities, potentially contributing to stress and anxiety.

Piteo and Ward (2020) found that the time spent on or the frequency of social networking sites (SNS), and erratic and addictive effects of SNS were significantly connected with higher levels of depressive indexes. Two cross-sectional studies found that excessive time spent on or the frequency of SNS use and higher levels of interaction on SNS were significantly connected with higher levels of anxiety indexes. However, other dynamic factors could influence the connection between SNS and depressive and anxiety symptoms, along with perceived social support, social comparisons and FOMO (fear of missing out).

Zhao and Zhou (2020) found that a higher level of social media use was connected with a negative psychological state. More exposure to disasterous news through social media was connected with greater levels of depression for participants with high levels of disaster stressors. Path analysis showed negative affect negotiated the relevance of social media use and mental health. The result indicates that the disaster stressor may be a risk generator that gives rise to the harmful influence of social media use on depression. Excessive exposure to disasters on social media might trigger negative effects, which might in turn lead to mental health problems.

Gao et al. (2020) found a much higher occurrence of depression, anxiety and CDA (combination of depression and anxiety) during the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China because of social media exposure. Social media was one of the main sources of updating the COVID-19 information. The study also showed that 82% of respondents were often exposed to social media, and frequent SME (social media exposure) is linked with high levels of anxiety and CDA. There could be two reasons explaining the connection between SME and mental health issues. During the COVID-19 outbreak, disinformation and fake reports regarding the COVID-19 bombarded social media and stoked unfounded fears in many citizens, which upset people and harmed their mental health. Furthermore, many people manifested their negative feelings such as dread, concern, nervousness, and anxiety, among others, on social media, a communicable social network. Niederdeppe et al. (2021) examined the relevance between news media exposure and anxiety symptoms in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The researchers found that news media exposure was not significantly connected with anxiety indexes. The study suggests that the influence of news media exposure on mental health may depend on the specific context.

Method

Research Design

In selecting a suitable method, the mixed method was considered to be the best option based on the complexity and multiplicity of the subject matter. The mixed-method approach ensured empirical views of this intricate concept of news and media exposure, depression and anxiety symptoms among the public universities' students in Dhaka City. Qualitative studies were used to capture the process by using focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), while a quantitative approach helped to elucidate the present scenario regarding depression and anxiety symptoms of the university students in a quantitative way.

Study Area

The current study was conducted in Dhaka at public universities such as Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Maritime University (BSMRMU), Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University (SAU), University of Dhaka (DU), Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Bangladesh University of Textiles (BUTEX), Jagannath University (JnU) and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Aviation and Aerospace University (BSMRAAU). The respondents in the study were students of these universities and their ages ranged between 19 and 25 years.

Sample Size and Sampling

The sample for the research consisted of 166 respondents of which 160 were students who participated in the survey and FGDs while six were mental health professionals who were interviewed. The sample was selected through convenience sampling methods.

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation theory was a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the relevance of media exposure and mental health outcomes, particularly in the context of news and social media consumption of public university students in Dhaka City. This theory, which was associated with George Gerbner and his colleagues, suggested that prolonged exposure to media content forms people's understandings of social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Cultivation theory suggests that the media's portrayal of the world, particularly in terms of violence, crime, and negative events, can contribute to a heightened sense of fear, anxiety, and helplessness. News media frequently concentrate on sensationalized stories, which may lead individuals to develop a distorted perception of the frequency and severity of such events. Similarly, social media platforms can expose students to idealized representations of others' lives, which may produce feelings of inadequacy, comparison, and anxiety.

Data Collection

This study included both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was collected using both the qualitative and quantitative approach from public university students located in Dhaka, while secondary data was collected from a literature review that included published articles, authentic website articles, books, websites related to news impact, and social media exposure of depression and anxiety.

Instruments

In this study discussion with respondents, surveys, KIIs, FGDs, and open-ended questionnaires were developed and used as research instruments for collecting primary source of data. A form with relevant questionnaires was provided for the survey. For the FGDs, groups consisted of between eight to 12 members while audio or video recordings were made with the respondents' consent. KIIs were conducted with mental health professionals to ascertain their experiences in

this field. Research instruments for collecting secondary sources of data were standard textbooks, articles, journals, newspapers, and websites.

Results

Table 1 indicated that 160 respondents, namely 1.3 per cent of the participants, were 18 years old, 2.5 per cent were 19, and 6.9 per cent were aged 20. Those aged aged 21 and 22 formed 12.5 per cent and 19.4 per cent, respectively. The highest percentage of age frequency is 31.8 per cent which comprised those aged 23. A total of 17.5 per cent of the respondents were 24 and 8.1 per cent were 25 years old. In terms of gender, Figure 1 indicated that 58.1 per cent of the respondents were male while 41.9 per cent were female. During the survey it was observed that the participation of females in higher education is steadily increasing.

Table 1. Frequency of Age

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	18	2	1.3	1.3	1.3
	19	4	2.5	2.5	3.8
	20	11	6.9	6.9	10.7
	21	20	12.5	12.5	23.2
	22	31	19.4	19.4	42.6
	23	51	31.8	31.8	74.4
	24	28	17.5	17.5	91.9
	25	13	8.1	8.1	100.0
	Total		160	100.0	100.0

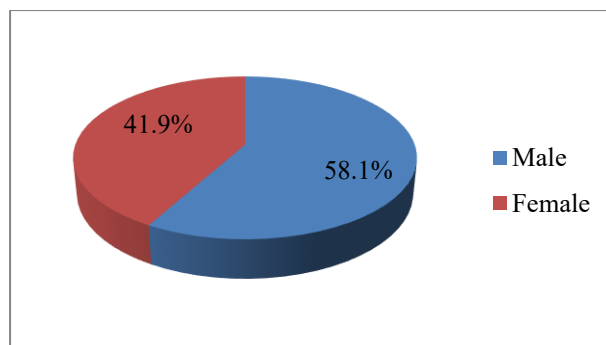


Figure 1. Frequency of Gender

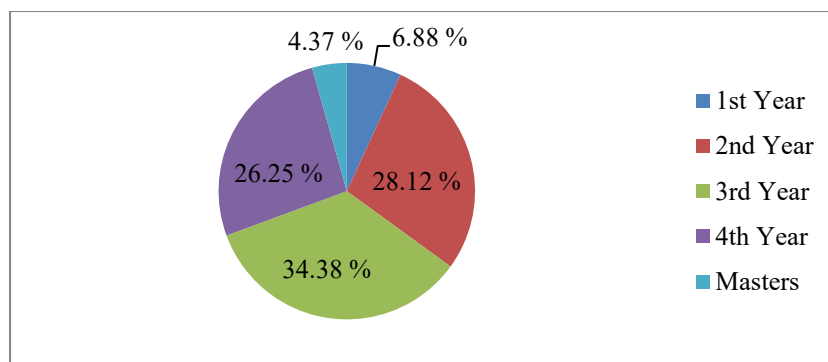


Figure 2. Current Level of Education

According to Figure 2, 6.88 per cent of the respondents are 1st year students, 28.12 per cent are in their 2nd year, 34.38 per cent in their 3rd year, while 26.25 per cent are 4th year students. Master's students comprised 4.37 per cent of the respondents.

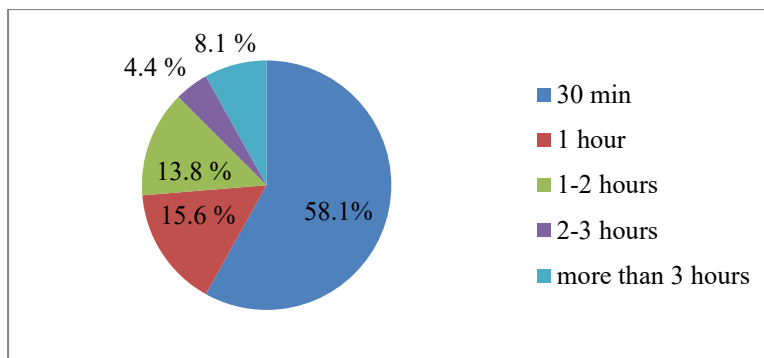


Figure 3. Time Spent Consuming News from Traditional Media per Day

Traditional media include as newspapers, TV, and magazines. In the current survey, Figure 3 reflects that 58.1 per cent of the total participants spent 30 minutes each day consuming news from traditional media and 15.6 per cent of the total participants spent one hour. About 13.8 per cent of the total participants spent between one to two hours and 4.4 per cent spent between two to three hours in a day consuming news from traditional media. More than three hours per day were spent consuming news from traditional media by 8.1 per cent of the total respondents.

Because of the easy access and availability, people used to spend some time-consuming news from traditional media. But presently, people's lives are busy and traditional news sources have been overtaken by online news websites.

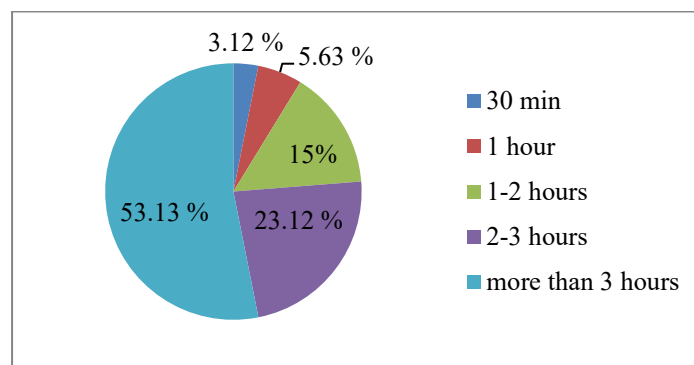


Figure 4. Time Spent on Social Media Platforms per Day

Figure 4 shows that 3.12 per cent of the respondents spent 30 minutes on social media platform per day while 5.63 per cent spent one hour on social media per day. A total of 15.0 per cent spent between one and two hours per day on social media while 23.12 per cent spent between two to three hours. The highest, namely 53.13 per cent, spent more than three hours on social media daily. Owing to its easy access, for communication, educational and entertainment purposes people are now using social media platforms frequently in their daily lives. Moreover, new social media platforms' features attract people to use them. This could be another reason for people's frequent usage of social media platforms.

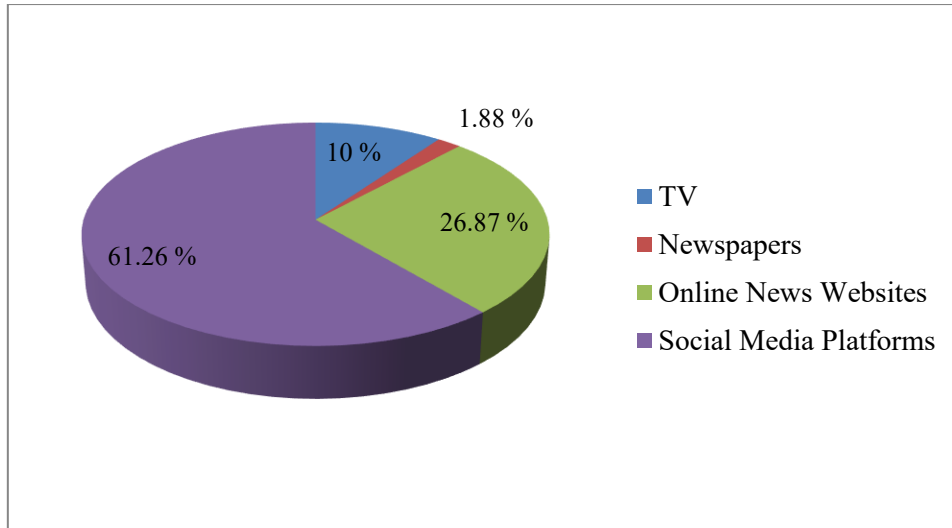


Figure 5. Main Sources of News

According to Figure 5, 10.0 per cent of the respondents' main news sources are TV, while 1.88 per cent depend on newspapers, 26.87 per cent are on online news websites and 61.26 per cent of respondents' main news sources are social media platforms. Because of the easy access of news updates, social media platforms have taken the place of newspapers as a source of news. All types of news and information are now available on social media platforms: that is why other sources, especially TV and newspapers, are slowly losing their popularity at the present time.

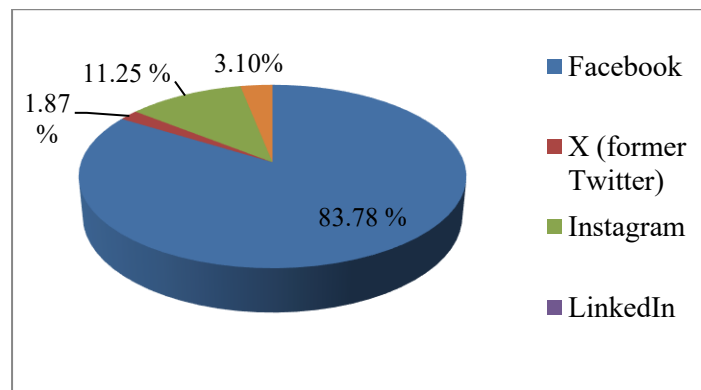


Figure 6. Frequency of Social Media Use

A total of 83.78 per cent of the total respondents use Facebook frequently, 1.87 per cent use X (formerly Twitter), 11.25 per cent use Instagram and 3.10 per cent use other social media such as YouTube and WhatsApp (Figure 6). The study did not find any respondents who use LinkedIn or Snapchat. In Facebook, anyone can post, watch videos, and communicate with others easily. This explains why this social medium attracts large numbers of people.

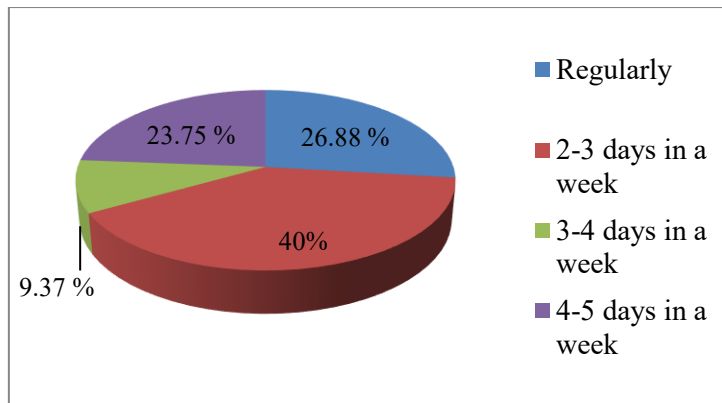


Figure 7. Post with Content on Social Media

The study found that 26.88 per cent of the respondents post content on social media regularly (daily) (Figure 7). In addition, 40 per cent post content on social media two or three times a week while 9.37 per cent post three or four times a week. A total of 23.75 per cent post content on social media four or five times a week. It can be concluded that almost 50.63 per cent of the respondents post content on social media fairly regularly.

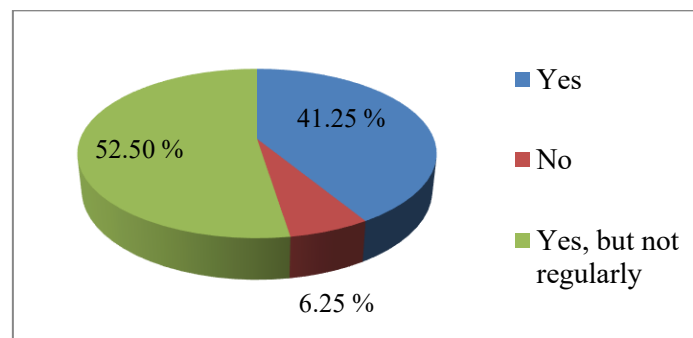


Figure 8. Follow News Updates on Social Media

Figure 8 shows that a total of 41.25 per cent of respondents follow news updates on social media, 6.25 per cent do not follow and 52.50 per cent follow news updates on social media, but not regularly. When asked the reasons behind their not following news updates regularly, they indicated lack of time or uninteresting news as their reasons.

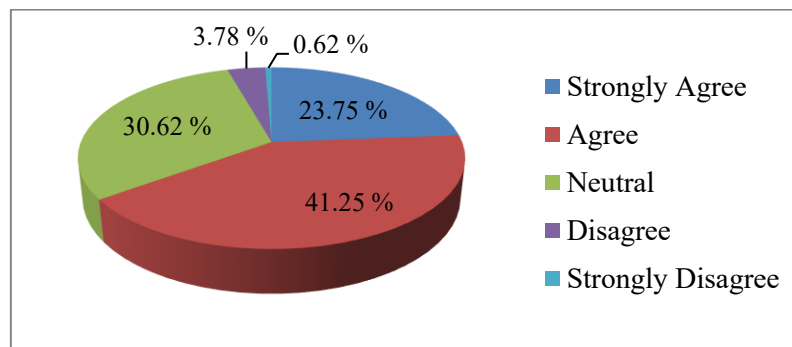


Figure 9. Effect of News and Social Media on Mood/Emotions

The findings (Figure 9) show that 23.75 per cent of the participants strongly agree that news on social media has an effect on mood and emotions. A total of 41.25 per cent agreed with the statement, 30.62 per cent of the total respondents remained neutral, 3.78 per cent disagreed with the statement and only 0.62 per cent of the participants strongly disagreed that news on social media, whether good or bad, affects mood and emotions. The majority of respondents believe that news on social media affects their moods and emotions. The type of effect depends on the nature of the news and contents. If it is positive news or content, then the users' moods and emotions are affected positively while the converse is true of negative content.

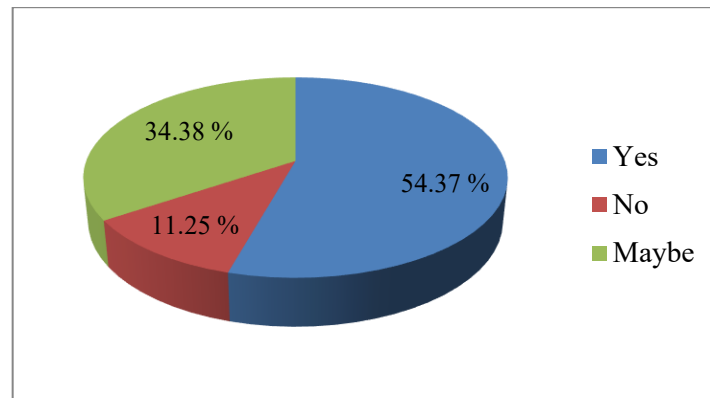


Figure 10. Anxiety after Watching Sensationalized News on Traditional or Social Media

The findings (Figure 10) show that 54.37 per cent of the respondents felt anxious or distressed after watching sensational news on traditional and social media. About 11.25 per cent of the respondents did not feel anxious or distressed by sensational news on either traditional or social media. In addition, 34.38 per cent of the respondents did not acknowledge their feelings of anxiety after watching sensational news on either traditional or social media. This explains why these people were unsure regarding their feelings of anxiety.

Contribution to Anxiety and Depression by Sensationalized News and Exaggerated Social Media Posts

When people watch sensationalized news, they might feel anxious, sometimes leading to depression. For example, the attack on the Twin Towers in the USA, the bombing during the Boston Marathon or other sensationalized news created anxiety and depression among the audience. In various previous studies, a correlation between depression and anxiety and sensationalized news was found.

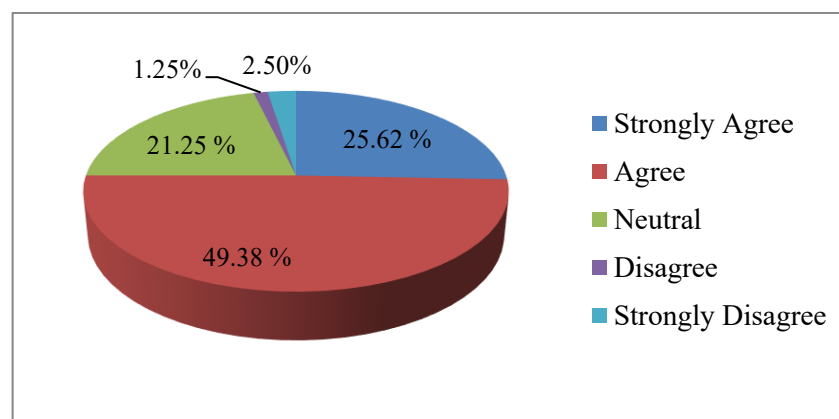


Figure 11. Anxiety and Depression caused by Sensationalized News and Exaggerated Social Media Posts

In the current study, Figure 11 reflects that 25.62 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed that sensationalized news and exaggerated social media posts lead to feelings of anxiety and depression. The majority, namely 49.38 per cent, of the respondents agreed that sensationalized news and exaggerated social media posts have an influence on people’s anxiety and depression. In addition, 21.25 per cent of the respondents remained neutral about the impact of sensationalized news and exaggerated social media on anxiety and depression levels. Only 1.25 per cent and 2.50 per cent of the respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively that anxiety and depression are exacerbated by sensationalized news and exaggerated social media posts. Most of the respondents believe that sensationalized news and exaggerated social media posts play an important role in increasing levels of depression and anxiety. They indicated that when they watch some sensationalized news such as a brother killing his own brother, friends killing their friends or other national sensitive issues, they feel that their anxiety level increases.

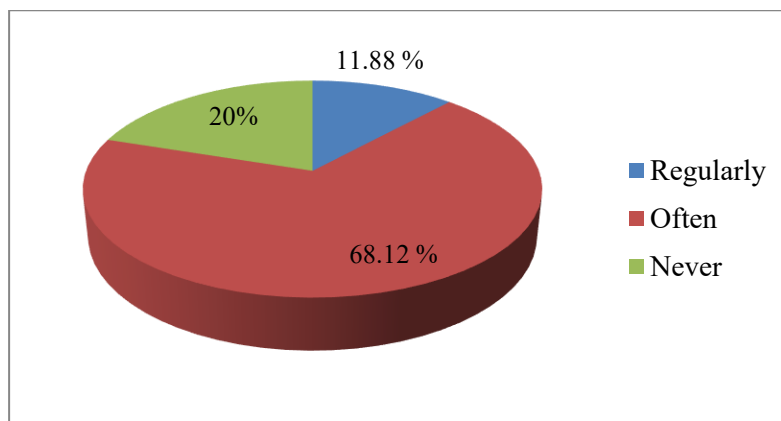


Figure 12. Frequency of Experienced Anxiety

The current study found that 11.88 per cent of the respondents regularly experienced anxiety in their lives, 68.12 per cent of the respondents often felt anxiety and 20.00 per cent of the respondents said that they have never felt anxiety (Figure 12). The negative content of news for both traditional and social media platforms plays a prominent role in increasing anxiety level. In addition, higher levels of media exposure and watching the contents on these social media platforms also contribute to increased anxiety.

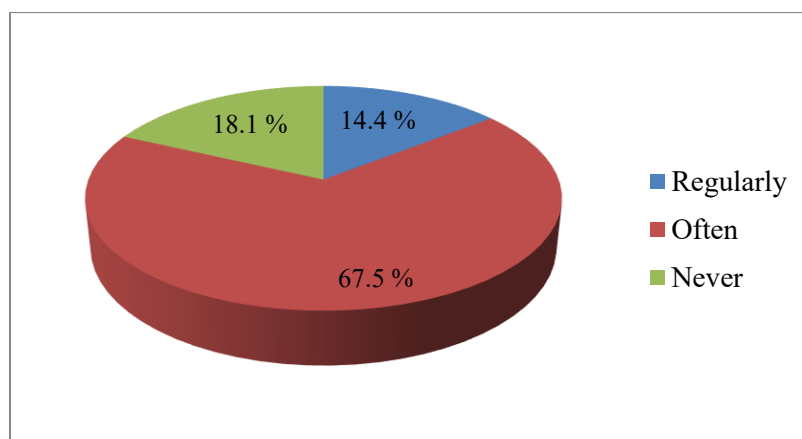


Figure 13. Frequency of Experienced Depression

The data (Figure 13) also shows that 14.4 per cent of the respondents regularly experienced depression, 67.5 per cent often experienced depression and 18.1 per cent they have never

experienced depression. When people watch negative news on traditional or social media, their anxiety levels increase. This increase can also lead to the onset of depression as the final stage of anxiety. There is an interconnection between anxiety and depression. If anxiety levels increase, depression also increases; conversely, when anxiety levels decrease, depression levels also decrease.

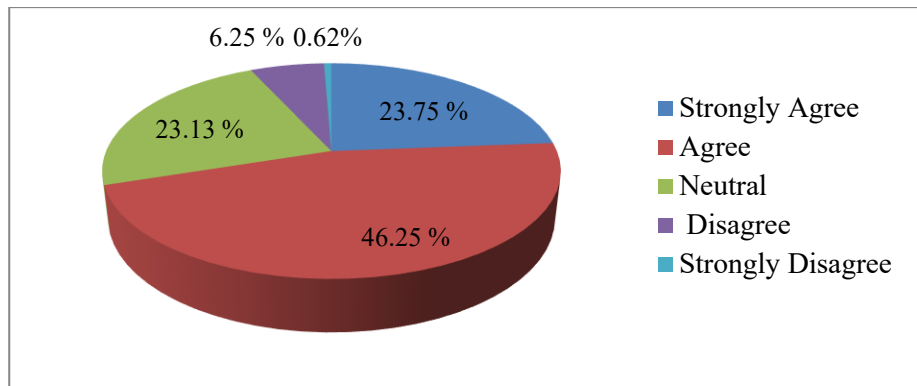


Figure 14. Role of Media Exposure in Emotional Wellbeing

Figure 14 shows that 23.75 per cent of the participants strongly agreed that media exposure plays a role in emotional wellbeing, 46.25 per cent agree, while 23.13 per cent remained neutral. Only 6.25 per cent of the respondents disagreed and 0.62 per cent strongly disagreed that media exposure plays a role in emotional wellbeing.

Media exposure plays a significant role in emotional wellbeing, depending on the types of news or contents. When the news is positive, the audience feel positive and their emotional wellbeing become positive. They are encouraged by the news which helps them to become mentally stronger and to be an asset to society. The broadcasting of negative has an opposite effect. Therefore, the individual's wellbeing often depends on the role of social media.

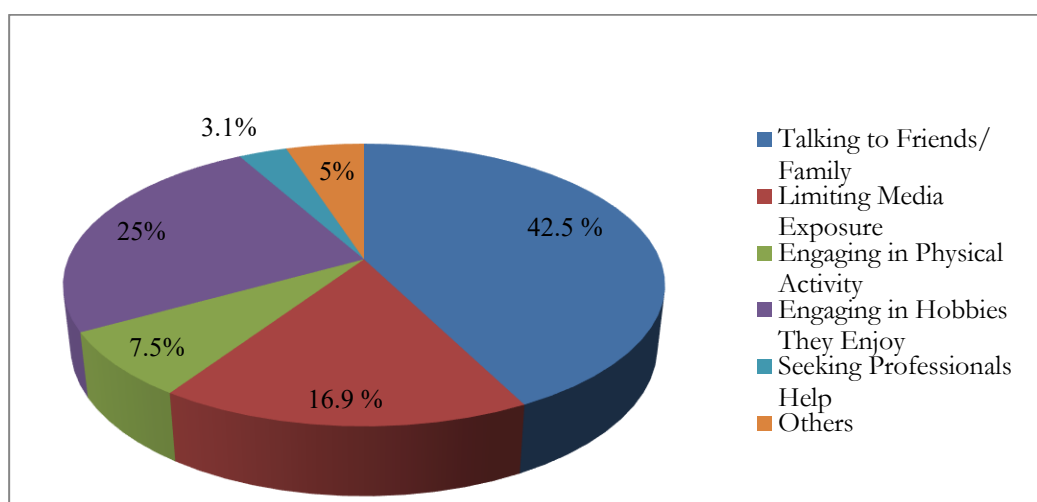


Figure 15. Coping Mechanisms when Feeling Stressed/Anxious after Negative Media Exposure

The data (Figure 15) shows that 42.5 per cent of the respondents talk to their friends and family as a coping mechanism when they feel anxious after negative media exposure, while 16.9 per cent respondents limit their media exposure. About 7.5 per cent of the respondents engage in

physical activities such as sports, exercise, and yoga as an effective mechanism of coping when they feel anxious after media exposure. One-quarter (25.0 per cent) engage in hobbies they enjoy whereas only 3.1 per cent of the respondents seek professional help to cope with their feelings of anxiety because of negative media exposure. Finally, 5.0 per cent of respondents find other ways such as sleeping and listening to music as a coping mechanism when they feel anxious after negative media exposure.

Coping strategies regarding anxiety differ since people are psychologically not the same. Hence various strategies were identified in this study when the respondents felt anxious after negative media exposure. However, it was found that friends and family could be the best source of minimizing stress and anxiety since we spend most of our time with family or friends. People feel free to share their concerns with those close to them, which in turn lessens the feelings of distress, anxiety, and depression.

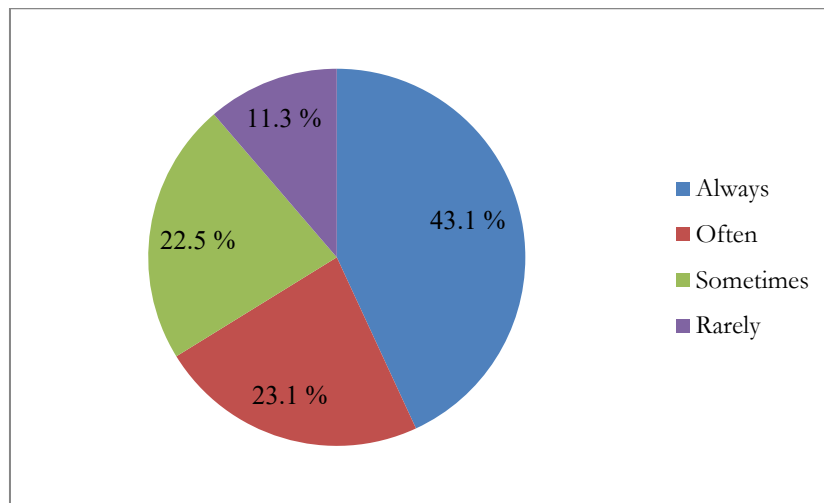


Figure 16. Frequency of Face-to-Face Interactions with Family/Friends Outside of Social Media

A total of 43.1 per cent (Figure 16) of the respondents always engage in face-to-face interactions with family or friends beside social media, 23.1 per cent of the respondents often engage in face-to-face interactions with family or friends, 22.5 per cent of the respondents sometimes engage in face-to-face interactions and only 11.3 per cent of the respondents rarely engage in face-to-face interactions with their family or friends outside of social media. Many of the respondents are from the outside of Dhaka and they live communally or in university residences while studying. They therefore have few opportunities to engage in face-to-face interactions with their family or friends outside of social media. However, the study found there were no respondents who have never engaged in face-to-face interactions with their family or friends outside of social media.

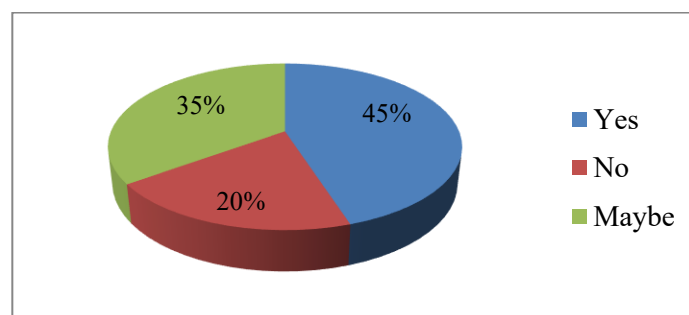


Figure 17. Feeling Supported after Discussions with Social Circle About Own Emotions

The data in Figure 17 shows that 45.0 per cent of the respondents felt supported after discussing their emotions with their social circle, 20.0 per cent said that they did not feel any support after such discussions and 35.0 per cent remained doubtful regarding always feeling supported after discussions with their social circle about their emotions.

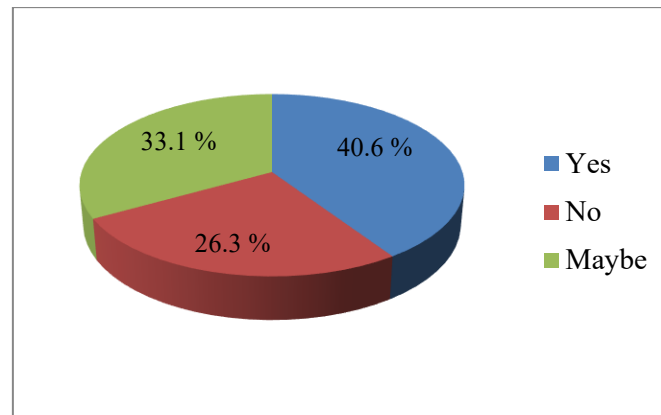


Figure 18. Academic Changes in Academic Performance Attributed to Media Exposure and Potential Influence on Mental Health

The data in Figure 18 shows that 40.6 per cent of the respondents noticed changes in their academic performance because of media exposure and its strong influence on mental health, 26.3 per cent of the respondents said that they did not notice any changes and 33.1 per cent remained in doubt regarding changes in their academic performance because of media disclosure and its potential influence on mental health. Those who noticed changes indicated that these were negative changes in their academic performance (i.e., scoring lower marks in examinations compared to previously and loss of concentration in classes). It was found that media exposure frequently has a negative impact on academic performance.

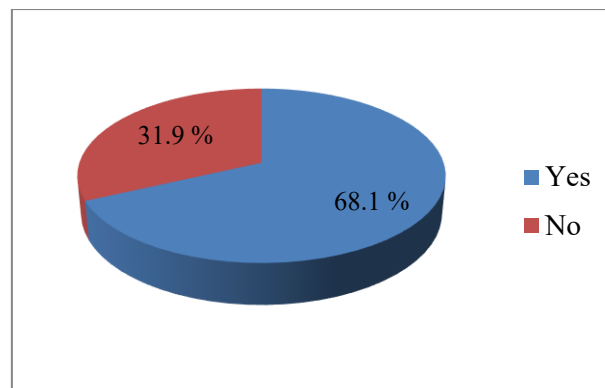


Figure 19: Awareness of Availability of Mental Health Resources and Support Services in University

According to Figure 19, a total of 68.1 per cent of the participants said that they were aware of the presence of mental health resources and support services in their university while 31.9 per cent of the participants said that they were not. Lack of publicity relating to the counselling or other sources of help regarding mental health by the university authorities are the reasons why some students are unaware of resources or support services available in their university to help them cope with their mental health issues.

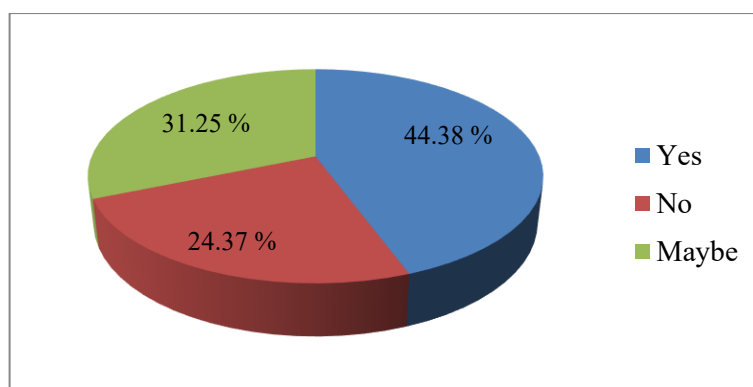


Figure 20. Open to Seeking Professionals Help if Experiencing Anxiety or Depression

The data in Figure 20 reveals that 44.38 per cent of the participants said that they would seek professional help if they experience depression or anxiety. About 24.32 per cent of the respondents said that they would not, citing social stigmatization as the reason for their unwillingness. A total of 31.2 per cent of the respondents said that they may seek professionals help if they were to experience depression or anxiety. In our society, many people have negative perceptions of mental health treatment and those who receive treatment for their mental health are stigmatized by some as being mad. This is why people, when experiencing depression or anxiety, are reluctant to consult a mental health professional for help. Moreover, the cost of counselling by a mental health professional is also high in our country which is another reason why people are reluctant to seek help.

Correlations of News and Social Media with Depression and Anxiety

Table 2: Correlation and Regression Table

No.	Variable Pair	Spearman Correlation (ρ)	Regression Coefficient	R ²
1	Social Media Time ↔ Anxiety	0.654	0.366	0.50
2	Social Media Time ↔ Depression	0.672	0.378	0.51
3	Traditional Media Time ↔ Anxiety	0.723	0.331	0.57
4	Traditional Media Time ↔ Depression	0.701	0.332	0.55
5	News/Social Media Opinion ↔ Anxiety	0.748	0.491	0.56
6	News/Social Media Opinion ↔ Depression	0.759	0.510	0.58
7	Face-to-Face Interaction ↔ Feeling Supported	0.965	0.799	0.89
8	Sensationalized News ↔ Mental Health Impact	0.943	0.935	0.86
9	Anxiety ↔ Depression	0.935	0.951	0.87
10	News Effect on Emotions ↔ Anxiety	0.788	0.506	0.62
11	News Effect on Emotions ↔ Depression	0.797	0.522	0.64
12	Face-to-Face Interaction ↔ Anxiety	0.712	0.389	0.53
13	Face-to-Face Interaction ↔ Depression	0.709	0.395	0.53
14	Academic Change ↔ Anxiety	0.679	0.444	0.46
15	Academic Change ↔ Depression	0.672	0.448	0.45
16	Sensationalized News ↔ Academic Change	0.826	0.774	0.61
17	Post Content Frequency ↔ Anxiety	0.784	0.404	0.64
18	Post Content Frequency ↔ Depression	0.781	0.405	0.62

Based on the correlation and regression analyses of the survey data collected from 160 students across various public universities in Dhaka, several meaningful patterns emerged regarding media consumption and mental health (Table 2). A strong positive correlation was observed between time spent on social media and both anxiety ($\rho = 0.65$, $R^2 = 0.50$) and depression ($\rho = 0.67$, $R^2 = 0.51$), indicating that greater usage is associated with more frequent mental health symptoms. Similarly, traditional media consumption was also strongly related to anxiety ($\rho = 0.72$, $R^2 = 0.57$) and depression ($\rho = 0.70$, $R^2 = 0.55$).

Students' opinions on the emotional effects of news and social media showed a robust association with both anxiety ($\rho = 0.75$) and depression ($\rho = 0.76$), reinforcing the psychological impact of media perception. A very strong correlation was identified between face-to-face interaction and feeling supported ($\rho = 0.97$, $R^2 = 0.89$), underlining the protective role of in-person social contact in emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, exposure to sensationalized news significantly predicted the perception of negative mental health impacts ($\rho = 0.94$, $R^2 = 0.86$), while also linking strongly with changes in academic performance ($\rho = 0.83$, $R^2 = 0.61$).

The relationship between anxiety and depression frequency was also very high ($\rho = 0.93$, $R^2 = 0.87$), supporting their frequent co-occurrence. The perceived effect of news on emotions strongly predicted both anxiety ($\rho = 0.79$, $R^2 = 0.62$) and depression ($\rho = 0.80$, $R^2 = 0.64$). Interestingly, higher frequency of posting content on social media also correlated with increased symptoms of anxiety ($\rho = 0.78$, $R^2 = 0.64$) and depression ($\rho = 0.78$, $R^2 = 0.62$). Lastly, academic changes following media exposure were positively associated with both anxiety and depression ($\rho \approx 0.68$). Overall, the data indicate that students are deeply affected by both the content and the frequency of media exposure, with these influences permeating their emotional wellbeing, academic performance, and social functioning. These findings underscore the urgent need for mental health support, media literacy education, and healthy coping strategies in university environments.

Qualitative Findings

Media Exposure

Most of the respondents engaged with news sources (newspapers, news websites, and TV news) regularly, spending approximately one to three hours per day. They usually checked news websites and follow updates on social media platforms. They spent around three to five hours on social media platforms each day. They used platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to connect with peers, stay updated on news, and engage with various interests. They often came across a mix of topics in the media, including politics, health, entertainment and technology. Recently, significant focus has been on pandemic-related news and social justice issues. The specific topics often depend on individual interests and the sources they follow.

Most respondents believed that the news they consume affects their moods. For instance, reading about negative news, such as natural disasters or conflicts, made them feel anxious and helpless. On the other hand, positive news stories boosted their moods and gave them hope. The respondents also believed that exposure to sensational or negative news could definitely impact on their mental wellbeing. It could increase anxiety, make them more stressed, and even lead to feelings of sadness. It is crucial to be mindful of how much of these types of content they consume to protect their mental health.

Social Media Engagement

The respondents spent approximately three to four hours per day on social media. They encountered a mix of content on social media, with a noticeable presence of both good and bad

content. It depends on the people and the trending topics they follow. The respondents often felt pressure to present an ideal version of themselves on social media. It could make them feel inadequate and lead to self-esteem issues. The need for validation through likes and comments can be overwhelming at times. Most of the respondents are of the opinion that comparing themselves to others on social media has affected their self-esteem. Seeing others' seemingly perfect lives could create feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, impacting their mental health negatively.

Mental Health Impact

Most of the respondents have experienced changes in their mood or anxiety levels after engaging with news and social media. For example, reading distressing news before bed has led to difficulty sleeping and increased anxiety. Some have mentioned feeling anxious after reading distressing news, while others have felt happier after engaging with positive content. Most of the respondents believed that constant exposure to negative news and sensationalized content could contribute to feelings of depression or anxiety by overwhelming them with negative information. It could create a sense of hopelessness and an inability to disconnect from stressors.

Coping Mechanisms

When asked about coping mechanisms when the respondents feel depression or anxiety, they indicated that they cope with depression or anxiety by taking breaks from news and social media, practising mindfulness, seeking professional help, or talking to friends or family about their feelings. Engaging in physical activity, maintaining a routine and pursuing hobbies have been found to be helpful in managing the mental wellbeing despite negative media exposure.

When asked for their opinion about the strategies which could be effective in promoting healthier media consumption habits among university students, they indicated that the universities could offer workshops on media literacy and mental health awareness. The universities could also promote digital detox challenges or encourage students to take breaks from screens. Creating safe spaces for discussing the influence of media exposure on mental health could be beneficial, according to the respondents.

University Life and Support

Most of the respondents said that there have been instances where excessive social media use or exposure to distressing news has affected their academic performance and interactions with peers. It was distracting and emotionally draining. Some respondents found themselves less attentive in their academic life because of excessive social media use. When they did not get their expected results, they felt depressed, leading to spending limited time with their friends. According to them, this excessive social media use or exposure to distressing news has harmed them significantly in their both academic and personal lives.

Most of the respondents said that their university offer counselling services, mental health workshops and support services when asked about the support system which their university provides regarding their mental health improvement. They also indicated that they have a dedicated mental health centre run by trained professionals.

Despite these, the respondents have also mentioned some issues which they would like to see offered by the university for their mental health. The respondents would like more emphasis on digital wellbeing and media literacy as part of the mental health assistance services offered on campus. This could help students better navigate the influence of media exposure on their mental health.

Respondents also believe that there is a need for resources that specifically address the mental health effects of media exposure. According to the respondents, universities and communities should provide guidance on managing media consumption healthily. In addition, the universities should provide resources and support to help students manage the negative influence of news and social media on their mental health. This could include workshops, awareness campaigns, and access to mental health professionals who are knowledgeable about this issue.

Media Literacy and Awareness

The respondents felt reasonably knowledgeable about distinguishing between reliable and misleading information. However, they also said that they sometimes fail to discern which news is real and which is fake. They indicated that there is always room for improvement because this is an ongoing learning process. The respondents considered improving media literacy to be essential to alleviate the negative impacts of media exposure on mental health. It could help individuals access information in a critical way and make informed choices about their media consumption. The respondents also believed that media outlets should take more responsibility for the impact of their content on mental health. They should strive for balanced reporting and consider the potential emotional consequences of their stories.

Suggestions for Improvement

Based on their experiences, the respondents suggested that universities or the government could take some measures to address media's potential influence on mental health. The universities and the government should invest in media literacy education, promote balanced reporting, and support research on the influence of media on mental health. The universities and the government could also collaborate with mental health organizations to develop guidelines for responsible media content.

The respondents also would like to see some media content that could positively influence mental wellbeing. They would prefer more solutions-oriented reporting and content which promotes positive change and wellbeing. Balanced coverage of both challenges and potential solutions can have a positive influence on mental health. Media should also provide clear disclaimers for sensitive content and information about resources for seeking help when needed.

A key informant interview (KII) was conducted with mental health professionals who have extensive experience working with university students. The focus was on how news and social media consumption affect the mental health of these students and the strategies recommended mitigating potential negative effects. The interviewees stressed that news and social media consumption could significantly impact the mental health of university students. Excessive exposure to negative news and instances of cyberbullying on social media platforms could lead to heightened stress, anxiety, and even depression among students. According to the experts, media exposure contributes to depression and anxiety through constant exposure to distressing news, unrealistic body image standards propagated on social media, and the prevalence of cyberbullying. They found some specific types of media content, such as events with high emotional impact such as natural disasters or major crises, as well as crime news, were highlighted as having a more substantial impact on students' mental health. Such content often leads to distress and heightened anxiety. They emphasized the importance of media literacy in helping students critically assess the information they consume. Media literacy empowers students to differentiate between credible and unreliable sources, reducing the effective negative effects of media exposure on their mental health.

The experts recommended some coping strategies to assist students experiencing distress due to news or social media content. These include limiting screen time, increasing time spent with family, seeking social support, and engaging in stress-reduction activities such as mindfulness and exercise. According to the interviewees, counsellors could identify the dominance of media consumption on students' mental health by discussing their media habits during assessments and observing changes in mental health alongside media exposure.

As psychiatrists, the interviewees recommended that the students find a balance between staying informed and protecting their mental wellbeing. This involves setting limits on media consumption, curating a positive online environment, fact-checking news, and setting boundaries for discussions to avoid heated arguments that can lead to stress. The guidelines include critical thinking, fact-checking information, diversifying news sources, and avoiding excessive exposure to distressing content. The interviewees highlighted the importance of universities collaborating with mental health professionals to address the power of media exposure on students' mental health. Strategies for collaboration include conducting research, integrating mental health professionals into support services, establishing crisis intervention teams, and maintaining open communication.

Collaboration between media outlets and mental health experts was deemed highly beneficial for promoting responsible reporting and content creation that considers the mental health implications of their work. This collaboration can also lead to content that educates the public on mental health problems, reducing stigma and increasing awareness. The experts emphasized the need for universities to provide counselling services, seminars, support groups, and workshops specifically addressing media-induced mental health challenges. Such services can help students cope with media-induced depression or anxiety, addressing serious issues prevalent among students today. Based on their experience, successful interventions include introducing media literacy courses, mindfulness training, and support groups for students to share their experiences and coping strategies, ultimately helping students develop a healthier relationship with news and social media.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the news and social media consumption have a significant influence on the mental health, especially in terms of depression and anxiety symptoms of university students. Because of the easy access and availability, students are frequently engaging with social media such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, among others. Respondents reported spending a considerable amount of time on these platforms and encountering a mix of both positive and negative content. They acknowledged that negative news stories can lead to anxiety, stress and sometimes depression, while positive news could boost their mood. Excessive social media use also leads to feelings of inadequacy and self-esteem issues owing to constant comparison with others.

Globally, everyone's psychological make-up and lifestyles differ. Nevertheless, when people compare themselves with others, whether on social media or in real life, they may find that they are different, leading to sadness, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, this study found that there is less interaction of respondents with their families members. Family is the most important resource where we can share our concerns and receive mental support. However, when there is little interaction with them, people have to rely on social media or other news media for information. Excessive media exposure could result in people becoming disconnected from their families, leading to serious levels of anxiety, stress and depression. Furthermore, respondents mentioned experiencing mood changes and anxiety levels after engaging with distressing news and negative social media; this can affect their sleep and overall mental

wellbeing. They expressed concerns about constant exposure to sensational or negative content contributing to depression and anxiety.

Most of the respondents follow various news websites for a daily update. Not all websites are trustworthy. Some broadcast fake or unverified news. In this digital age, it is not difficult to open a proxy or fake website to spread fake news or propaganda. People are busy with their lives and do not have time to cross-check the news. They sometimes trust negative news blindly, suffering depression and anxiety as a result. Various coping mechanisms in the study to cope with depression and anxiety resulting from media exposure were also identified. These include taking breaks from news and social media, seeking professional help, and engaging in physical activities, among others. This study found less interest among the respondents to seek help from mental health professionals. Various social stigmas are responsible for this because in our society, people regard mental health problems as diseases, sometimes perceiving the people who are suffering some mental health problem as deranged or unbalanced. For this reason, people are unwilling to consult a mental health professional regarding their problems.

While the respondents feel reasonably knowledgeable about distinguishing between reliable and misleading information, they acknowledge that there is room for improvement in media literacy. They believe that media literacy is crucial to mitigating the negative effects of media exposure on mental health. The perceptions of respondents on the role of universities in promoting healthier media consumption were also highlighted in this study. The universities could offer workshops on media literacy and mental health awareness, encouraging digital detox challenges and creating safe spaces for discussing the influence of media exposure on mental health. Mental health professionals confirmed the influence of media exposure on students' mental health, especially exposure to negative news and cyberbullying. They emphasized the importance of media literacy in helping students assess information critically and recommended coping strategies such as limiting screen time, seeking social support, and engaging in stress-reduction activities. To address these issues, they suggested that universities should collaborate with mental health professionals to conduct research, integrate mental health support services, and establish crisis intervention teams. Collaboration between media outlets and mental health experts could promote responsible reporting and content creation that considers mental health implications.

The research findings also highlight the necessity for universities, media outlets and government to invest in media literacy education, promote balanced reporting, and support research to mitigate the negative impact of media consumption on students' mental health. Students' wellbeing could be positively influenced by more solution-oriented reporting and clear disclaimers for sensitive content in media.

Conclusion

This sociological study sheds light on the profound influence of news and social media on students' mental health in public universities of Dhaka City. The findings underscore the significant impact of media exposure on depression and anxiety symptoms, emphasizing the need for a wide understanding of the relevance of media consumption and mental well-being. The research reveals that prolonged exposure to distressing news content and excessive use of social media can lead to heightened levels of depression and anxiety among students. The constant exposure to negative events and the pressure to conform to unrealistic standards on social media platforms create a toxic environment that negatively affects students' mental health. The study also highlights the nature of social comparison on social media, where students compare themselves to others, often leading to feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-esteem. Furthermore, information overload from continuous news consumption can overwhelm

students and exacerbate their anxiety, making them feel emotionally drained and desensitized to emotional stimuli. While the findings of this research offer rich insights into the complex relevance of media exposure and mental health, it also acknowledged certain limitations, such as the cross-sectional role of the research and self-reported data. Future longitudinal studies are warranted to establish causality and gain a wider perception of the underlying mechanisms.

In response to the concerning impacts identified, this study recommends several measures to mitigate the negative influence of news and social media on students. Universities should integrate accessible mental health services on campus to offer psychological support and counselling to students in distress. Media literacy programmes should be introduced within academic curricula to help students assess digital content critically, manage information overload, and resist harmful social comparisons. Awareness campaigns—both within and beyond educational institutions—are essential to destigmatize mental health struggles and encourage help-seeking behaviour. Additionally, digital well-being education should promote healthier online habits, such as limiting screen time and curating personalized, positive content feeds. Collaboration among government agencies, educational institutions, and social media platforms is also necessary to regulate harmful content and promote mental health-friendly digital environments. Policymakers should prioritize youth mental health in national education and health agendas by allocating resources and creating supportive policies.

Finally, this sociological study highlighted the urgency to address the influence of news and social media on depression and anxiety symptoms among students. It calls for a collective effort from educational institutions, policymakers, media platforms, and society as a whole to foster a healthier media environment that supports the well-being of young adults in Dhaka City's public universities and beyond. By nurturing media literacy and promoting mental health awareness, we can create a more resilient generation better equipped to navigate the challenges of modern media consumption while maintaining their mental wellbeing. By recognizing the potential risks associated with media exposure, we can work to creating a healthier and more youthful generation of students.

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Appendix 1 (Survey Questionnaires)

1. Age:

19 20 21 22 23 24 25

2. Sex:

Male Female

3. University:

BUP BSMRMMU BSMRAAU BUET BUTEX DU JnU
 SAU

4. Current level of education:

1st Year 2nd Year 3rd Year 4th Year Master's

5. On average, how many times per day do you spend consuming news from traditional media sources (i.e. TV, Newspapers etc.)

30 min 1 hour 1–2 hours 2–3 hours more than 3 hours

6. On average, how many times per day do you spend on social media platforms?

30 min 1 hour 1–2 hours 2–3 hours more than 3 hours

7. What are the main sources of news you rely on?

TV Newspapers Online News Websites Social Media Platforms

8. Which social media do you use frequently?

Facebook Twitter Instagram LinkedIn Snapchat

Others (please specify)

9. How often do you post or interact with content on social media?

Regularly 2–3 days in a week 3–4 days in a week 4–5 days in a week

10. Do you follow news updates through social media?

Yes No Yes, but not regularly

11. Do you agree that news and social media content has potential to affect your mood or emotions?

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

12. Have you ever felt anxious or distressed after reading or watching news content on traditional media or social media platforms?

Yes No Neutral

13. Do you recall any news stories or social media posts that particularly affected your mood negatively? If yes, please describe one such incident:

14. Do you agree that sensationalized news and exaggerated social media posts can contribute to anxiety and depression?

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

15. How frequently do you experience symptoms of anxiety?

Regularly Often Never

16. How frequently do you experience symptoms of depression?

Regularly Often Never

- 17. Do you agree that media exposure plays a role in your emotional wellbeing?**
 Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree
- 18. When you feel stressed or anxious after media exposure, what do you usually do to cope with these feelings?**
 Talking to friends or family Limiting media exposure
 Engaging in physical activity (i.e. exercise, sports, yoga)
 Engaging in hobbies or activities you enjoy Seeking professional counseling or therapy
 Other (please specify)
- 19. How often do you engage in face-to-face social interactions with friends and family members outside of social media?**
 Regularly Often
- 20. Do you feel supported and understood by your social circle when discussing your feelings and emotions?**
 Yes No Moderate
- 21. Have you noticed any changes in your academic performance that you attribute to media exposure and potential impact on mental health?**
 Yes No Moderate
- 22. Are you aware of mental health resources and support services available within your university or in Dhaka City?**
 Yes No
- 23. Would you be open to seeking professional help if you experienced persistent anxiety or depression symptoms?**
 Yes No Moderate

Appendix 2 (KII Questionnaires)

1. Name:
2. Qualifications and specialization:
3. Years of experience:
4. Based on your professional experience, do you think news and social media consumption can influence the mental health of university students? If so, how?
5. What are the common ways in which media exposure can contribute to or exacerbate depression and anxiety symptoms among students?
6. Are there any specific types of media content (e.g., news events, social media trends) that tend to have a more significant impact on students' mental health?
7. In your opinion, how can media literacy play a role in mitigating the strong negative effects of media exposure on mental health?
8. Do you recommend any coping strategies or interventions for students who experience distress due to news or social media content?
9. What signs or symptoms do you commonly observe in students who are struggling with depression or anxiety related to media exposure?
10. How can university counsellors or mental health professionals identify whether media consumption is a contributing factor to a student's mental health challenges?
11. As a professional, do you have any recommendations for students on finding a balance between staying informed and protecting their mental well-being while consuming news and social media?
12. Are there any specific guidelines you would advise students to follow regarding media usage?
13. How do you think universities can collaborate with mental health professionals to address the influence of media exposure on student mental health?
14. Do you believe media outlets should collaborate with mental health experts to promote responsible reporting and consider mental health implications in their content creation?
15. Are there any specific mental health support services or interventions that you believe universities should offer to students to help them cope with media-induced depression or anxiety?
16. In your experience, have you come across any successful interventions that help students develop a healthier relationship with news and social media?