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EFFECTIVENESS OF ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT) IN REDUCING SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION AND ENHANCING PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY AMONG NURSING STUDENTS

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Use of social media can negatively affect the academic performance and psychological well-being of students. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) based intervention in reducing social media addiction and enhancing psychological flexibility among nursing students. A randomized controlled trial (RCT) was conducted and 24 students from a nursing institution were recruited, who were randomly assigned to an experimental group (n=12) and a control group (n=12). The measures used included the Demographic Information Form, Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II) (Bond et al., 2011) and the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) (Andreassen et al., 2016) before and after the intervention. paired samples and independent samples t-tests were applied to investigate the data. Results indicated that the ACT-based intervention significantly improved psychological flexibility and significantly reduced social media addiction levels. BSMAS post-intervention scores findings showed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups ($M = 11.25$ vs. 19.08, $t(22) = 6.51$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.77$), indicating a beneficial outcome for the experimental group. The findings demonstrate the efficacy of ACT-based intervention in reducing social media addiction and enhancing psychological flexibility among nursing students.



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Introduction

Up to 47% of the world's population was associated to the internet as of the end of 2016 and social media use has remained increasing consistently since then (McNicol & Thorsteinsson, 2017). With the aid of the internet, daily tasks have converted more manageable and more opportunities for entertainment, connectivity and access to information have been produced (Agrawal & Singh, 2018). Social media has transformed the way people communicate, share information and collaborate with each other. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and other social media display place have allowed people to network and express themselves more easily. On the other hand, although the profits of social media, its extreme usage can cause to addiction and adversely impact students' mental well-being (Setyowati et al., 2023; Karekla & Kelly, 2022; Albal & Buzlu, 2021; Twohig & Crosby, 2010). The researchers measured internet craving and its consequences on the mental health of Iranian university students and findings were showed a clear link amongst internet addiction plus unhappiness. Moreover, regression analysis furthermore explained the predictors of exposure to internet addiction including motives for Internet use, faculty, depression, place of use and somatic symptoms (Lebni et al. 2020; Nasir et al., 2025; Khalid, 2017; Lakho et al., 2025). Internet disorder was also associated with depression, anxiety, internet gaming disorder and social media addiction (Lin et al. (2018)). Social media addiction has become a prevalent badly behaved, mostly among college students. Unnecessary social media use can badly affect students' academic performance, relationships and psychological well-being (Gilbert et al.,2019; Simon & Verboon, 2016; Glick et al.,2014; Ugur et al.,2021; Chou et al.,2017; Guldal et al.,2022). Issues such as the need for social support and fear of omitted out joined with the availability of the internet can contribute to increased social media use (Shaban et al., 2023).

Nursing students often have academic, clinical and personal stress and so, they may be more at risk to social media addiction. Students can be habitual of social media as a means of relaxation and to seek entertainment as a way of managing with their stress (Can, G., & Tulek, Z; 2023). The whole wellbeing of persons includes their mental, emotional, social and physical health and meaningfully upsets their value of life (Berdida & Grande, 2023).

The association between social media use and quality of life is complex. Excessive social media use has been linked with adverse effects on nursing students' mental health, including reduced happiness and increased stress levels (Buneviciene, I., & Bunevicius, A.;2021). Furthermore, social media use has also been associated with higher levels of social support and community engagement, which can improve health outcomes (Sayılı et al., 2023). The role of healthcare professionals, including nurses, is crucial in addressing the impact of social media addiction and improving the general well-being of the public. Nurses are actively engaged in educating and counseling patients and can play a vital role in moderating the adverse effects of social media use (Sayılı et al., 2023). Therefore, it is essential to identify the most effective nursing intervention to manage social media addiction among nursing students, as they are frequent users of social media and will be future healthcare providers. Previous research suggests that ACT can reduce psychological rigidity and also lower levels of depression, social anxiety and stress (Fledderus et al.,2013). ACT mainly focuses on acceptance plus commitment

as key practices that build emotional flexibility. It was worked well for undesirable thoughts plus behaviors, such as escaping (Hayes & Smith, 2006). ACT techniques can be used in diverse areas to deal with mental health problems that come from escaping like ACT techniques can be used to help people who struggle through social media addiction become more emotionally flexible (Hayes & Smith, 2006; LeJeune & Luoma, 2019). Hence, the present study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of an ACT-based intervention in reducing social media addiction and enhancing psychological flexibility among nursing students.

Hypotheses:

H1: There will be a significant decrease in social media addiction among nursing students who participated in the experimental group (ACT) compared to control group.

H2: There will be a significant increase in psychological flexibility among nursing students in the experimental group (ACT) compared to control group.

Method

Research Design

A randomized controlled trial (RCT) was employed for a pre-test post-test control group. Participants were randomly assigned for the experimental group (received ACT) and the control group (did not received ACT) to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention.

Sample

The sample of the present study was comprised of 24 nursing students through non-probability convenience sampling technique. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental group (n=12) and the control group (n=12), who met the inclusion criteria.The age range of the entire sample started from 18 years to 30 years.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from nursing institution and formal permission was obtained from the institution. The purpose of the study was informed to participants. They were informed that participation was voluntary, they had the right to withdraw at any stage and confidentiality would be maintained. Written consent was obtained. The pre-test assessment including a demographic information form, the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) (Andreassen et al.,2016) and the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II) (Bond et al.,2011) were administered. The experimental group received a structured Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) based intervention consisting of 12 sessions, while the control group did not receive intervention. After completion the 12 sessions then the post-test assessment was conducted for both groups using the same measures.

Measures

Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) (Andreassen et al., 2016)

Social media addiction was measured using the 6-item Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) developed by Andreassen et al. (2016). The Turkish validated version translated by Demirci (2019) was used in this study. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "very rarely" to 5 "very often". Total scores range from 6 to 30, with higher scores indicating a higher level of social media addiction. The scale is based on the six core components of addiction model, including salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict and relapse. The scale has demonstrated good psychometric properties and has been widely used in different populations (Banyai et al., 2017; Monacis et al., 2017).

Acceptance and Action Questionnaire–II (AAQ-II) (Bond et al., 2011)

Psychological flexibility was measured using the 7-item Acceptance and Action Questionnaire–II (AAQ-II) originally developed by Bond et al. (2011). The Turkish validated version translated by Yavuz et al. (2016) was used in this study. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "never true" to 7 "always true". Total scores range from 7 to 49, with higher scores indicating greater psychological inflexibility and experiential avoidance. The scale has demonstrated good psychometric properties and has been widely used across different populations (Alptekin et al., 2023; Uygur et al., 2020).

ACT Sessions Details

Session 1

Aim	Intervention	outcome
Social Media Use and Psychological Flexibility understanding. Session had several goals: establish a therapeutic rapport, explain about ACT,problemtic social media use and how affects our daily life and psychological flexiability.	Discussed in Session: Psychoeducation regarding ACT and a discussion on how our thoughts, emotions, urges, and behaviors are affected by social media use, and how excessive use of social media is associated with triggers. Homework: A diary was created in which the time spent, triggering factors, emotions and the reason for using social media were recorded.	Clients understood the purpose of ACT, the use of social media, psychological flexibility and emotions.

Session 2

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
mindfulness Awareness session focused on: understanding staying in the present moment,automatic social media use and mindfulness.	Discussed in Session: Conducted an activity on awareness regarding the present moment,a breathing focused exercise in mindfulness and an activity on mobile scrolling and its impact on daily activities. Homework: Made a daily 5 mintus exercise dairy and noted the situations when automatically used media.	Clients recognized the habit of using social media without any reason and automatic media use.

Session 3

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
Acceptance of Thoughts, Feelings and Urges session focused on: understanding acceptance, identifying distressing thoughts, emotions and tolerating the immediate desire to use social media.	Discussed in Session: Psychoeducated about acceptance and avoidance, helped identify the distressing emotions that lead to social media use, gave an exercise on acceptance and willingness and practiced identifying the desires that cause immediate social media use. Homework: Practiced noting and accepting the desire to use social media and kept a record of the situation, intensity of desire, response and outcome.	Clients learned that distressing thoughts, emotions and desires do not always need to be ignored. Clients demonstrated willingness by experiencing desires without using social media.

Session 4

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
Cognitive Defusion from Social Media-Related Thoughts session focused on:	Discussed in Session: Identifying common thoughts like "I should check my phone," explaining cognitive defusion,	Clients identified excessive social media use and learned to recognize these thoughts as just

Identifying the thoughts that lead to social media use, understanding the difference between reality and thoughts and learning the technique of cognitive defusion.	and doing its exercise, such as "I am having the thought that..." Homework: Identified and recorded the thoughts that led to social media use and practiced cognitive defusion when there was a desire to check social media.	thoughts, instead of acting on them by using social media.

Session 5

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
Understanding Personal Values **session focused on:** **To understand the concepts of values, to understand the meaningful areas of life and to know how excessive use of social media interferes with values**	Discussed in Session: Activity to identify values, introduced the life domains including family, health, education. Discussed long-term and short-term happiness. Homework: Completed the worksheet on personal values, activities and relationships.	The clients recognized that values and excessive use of social media affect activities and relationships.

Session 6

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
Developing Psychological Flexibility **session focused on:** **To understand psychological flexibility and psychological inflexibility and To learn flexible thoughts, emotions and desires.**	Discussed in Session: Reviewed the six core ACT processes, provided psychoeducation on avoidance, cognitive defusion, and present-moment awareness and practiced acceptance, defusion and mindfulness. Homework: Created a sheet to track psychological flexibility and wrote one situation daily where a flexible response was practiced.	Clients identified the pattern due to which social media is used excessively and recognized psychological flexibility.

Session 7

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
Self-as-Context and Reducing Identification with Thoughts **session focused on:** **To recognize the observing self and to separate the self from thoughts and emotions.**	Discussed in Session: Explained about self-as-context, did an observing self-exercise, how emotions and thoughts change while being the observing self, and practiced observing desires, emotions and thoughts without judgment. Homework: Practiced the observing self-exercise for 5 minutes daily and recorded experiences of observing thoughts without reacting.	Clients observed emotions and thoughts through their own capability.

Session 8

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
Managing Social Media Urges Through Willingness **session focused on:** **Understanding desires as a temporary experience, developing willingness when craving occurs and teaching strategies to respond to them rather than react.**	Discussed in Session: Identified common social media triggers, did exercises for urge surfing, used mindfulness for craving intensity, practiced for willingness and developed alternative responses for social media. Homework: Practiced delaying the immediate use of social media and noted the intensity, duration and response of the urges.	By working on willingness, clients tolerated social media cravings and were able to experience desires without taking hasty action, as these are temporary.

Session 9

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
Values-Based Behavioral Change **session focused on:**	Discussed in Session: Encouraged value-based goals, meaningful activities, a balanced routine, setting boundaries for	Clients had created value-based goals and replaced excessive social

Taking meaningful actions aligned with personal values, identifying inconsistency with personal values and increasing value-based activities.	social media and engagement in family, work and occupations. Homework: During the week, engaged in values-related activities and followed social media boundaries	media use with purposeful activities.

Session 10

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
Committed Action and Reducing Problematic Social Media Use session focused on: Focus on strengthening commitment to behavior change, strategies to reduce social media use and focusing on keeping habits consistent with personal values.	Discussed in Session: Reviewed progress regarding reducing social media, identified barriers to committed action and discussed reinforcement of psychological flexibility skills. Homework: Continued the values-based plan and monitored daily social media use and improvement.	Clients fulfilled their commitment to reduce social media use and learned to apply ACT skills during barriers and high risk situations.

Session 11

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
Consolidating ACT Skills and Preventing Relapse session focused on: Reviewed the skills learned in therapy, identified situations of excessive social media use	Discussed in Session: Revisited Acceptance, Mindfulness, Cognitive Defusion, Values, Self-as-Context and Committed Action, high-risk situations, discussed coping	Clients demonstrated that they identified risk factors, used strategies and applied ACT skills.

and discussed strategies to prevent relapse of this habit.	responses and managing future desire for social media. Homework: Created a relapse prevention plan and practiced continuing the most helpful ACT techniques.	

Session 12

Aim	Intervention	Outcome
Review, Maintenance and Future Action Plan session focused on: Reminded of all therapeutic progress, enhanced psychological flexibility, made a long-term plan and prepared the client to use ACT skills independently.	Discussed in Session: Reviewed reducing social media use, psychological flexibility skills, personal values, long-term valued activities and strategies. Homework: Continued the ACT plan and practiced mindfulness, defusion, and values-based actions.	Clients proved that they acted on reducing social media use, engaged in valued activities and responded to emotions, thoughts, and desires with flexibility.

Result

Table 1: Demographic statistics of the study characteristics

Characteristic	N	%
Age		
19	6	25
20	6	25
21	2	8.3
22	1	4.2
23	3	12.5
25	2	8.3
26	1	4.2
27	3	12.5
Gender		
Male	11	45.8
Female	13	54.2
Qualification		
Undergraduate	24	100
Marital Status		
Single	22	91.7
Married	2	8.3

Family Structure		
Joint Family System	15	62.5
Nuclear Family System	9	37.5
Socio Economic		
Lower middle	1	4.2
Middle	20	83.3
Upper Class	1	4.2
Upper Middle	2	8.3
Employment		
Employed	6	25
Unemployed	18	75

Note N=24

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the study participants. The total sample consisted of 24 undergraduate nursing students. Regarding age, the majority of participants were aged 19 (25%) and 20 (25%), followed by 23 and 27 years (12.5% each). In terms of gender, 13 participants (54.2%) were female and 11 (45.8%) were male. All participants were undergraduate students (100%). With respect to marital status, most participants were single (n=22, 91.7%) and only 2 (8.3%) were married. For family structure, 15 participants (62.5%) belonged to a joint family system, while 9 (37.5%) were from a nuclear family system. Regarding socioeconomic status, the majority belonged to the middle class (n=20, 83.3%).

Table 2: Paired Sample t-test Showing Difference from Pre-test to Post-test(N=24)

variable	Pre-test M(SD)	Post-test M(SD)	t	df	p
Psychological inflexibility (AAQ-II)	28.25(8.80)	17.88(3.71)	5.37	23	<.001
Social Media Addiction (BSMAS)	22.71(6.81)	15.17(4.93)	5.23	23	<.001

Note M=Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, t= t-value, df= Degree of freedom, p=significance Value

Table 2 results showed a statistically significant decrease in psychological inflexibility from pre-test ($M = 28.25$, $SD = 8.80$) to post-test ($M = 17.88$, $SD = 3.71$), $t(23) = 5.37$, $p < .001$. Similarly, social media addiction scores significantly decreased from pre-test ($M = 22.71$, $SD = 6.81$) to post-test ($M = 15.17$, $SD = 4.93$), $t(23) = 5.23$, $p < .001$.

Table 3: Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Experimental and Control groups

Variable	Experimental M(SD) (n=12)	Control M(SD) (n=12)	t(22)	P	Cohen's d

Psychological Inflexibility					
Pre-test	32.67(7.28)	23.83(8.21)	-2.79	.01	1.19
Post-test	18.08(3.92)	17.67(3.65)	0.27	.78	0.11
Social Media Addiction					
Pre-test	20,00(5.36)	25.42(7.23)	2.09	.049	0.89
Post-test	11.25(2.53)	19.08(3.32)	6.51	<.001	2.77

Note.M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation,p=significance value, Cohen's d= effect size

Table 3 results showed that an independent-samples t-test revealed that at pre-test, the experimental group reported significantly higher psychological inflexibility (M = 32.67, SD = 7.28) than the control group (M = 23.83, SD = 8.21), t(22) = -2.79, p = .011, d = 1.19. However, at post-test, no significant difference was found between the experimental (M = 18.08, SD = 3.92) and control groups (M = 17.67, SD = 3.65), t(22) = 0.27, p = .789, d = 0.11. For social media addiction, at post-test, the experimental group (M = 11.25, SD = 2.53) showed significantly lower scores than the control group (M = 19.08, SD = 3.32), t(22) = 6.51, p < .001, with a very large effect size (d = 2.77).

Discussion

The current study findings showed that the ACT-based intervention produced significant changes from pre-test to post-test, indicating its effectiveness in reducing problematic social media use and psychological inflexibility among nursing students.

Regarding demographic characteristics, the present sample were young adult nursing students aged 19 to 20 years. This age group represents a developmental stage where social media use is particularly high. This finding is consistent with previous literature indicating that younger university students are more vulnerable to problematic social media use due to greater digital engagement and peer-related pressures (Andreassen et al., 2016). The majority of participants were single, undergraduate nursing students and unemployed and belonged to a joint family system.

The paired-samples results shown a significant reduction in AAQ-II scores and BSMAS scores also decreased. These findings indicated significant improvement in psychological flexibility and a reduction in problematic social media use following ACT.

The independent-samples analysis showed that groups were significantly different at baseline for AAQ-II and BSMAS. After the intervention, there was no significant difference between groups in post-AAQ-II scores, but a highly significant difference was found in post-BSMAS scores, with the experimental group showing lower addiction scores than the control group. This outcome suggested that ACT was particularly effective in decreasing problematic social media use, with a very large effect size.

The findings regarding social media addiction are consistent with previous research. Researchers reported that social media provides several benefits, excessive use may adversely affect mental well-

being and contribute to addictive behavior (Agrawal & Singh,2018; Setyowati et al.,2023, Shaban et al.,2023). The current findings are also consistent with different researchers' studies who suggested that nursing students may be particularly vulnerable to excessive social media use because of academic demands, clinical responsibilities and personal stress (Berdida & Grande,2023; Sayili et al.,2023). The present study contributes to this limited literature by examining ACT intervention among nursing students.In the Pakistani context, a study of 623 university students found that higher social media use was associated with social media addiction and problematic social media behaviors (Dilawar et al., 2022). This evidence supports the results of the current study.

The findings regarding psychological flexibility and inflexibility are also supported by previous research. Researchers proposed that ACT-based methods increased psychological flexibility and decreased psychological difficulties (Hayes et al.,2006, Fledderus et al.,2013, Chou et al.,2017, Guldal et al.,2022). studies found that university students receiving an ACT-based intervention showed greater psychological flexibility, improved well-being and enhanced academic engagement, along with lower stress, anxiety and depression compared to the control group (Turan et al.,2023, Howell & Passmore.,2018, Hsu et al., 2023). ACT may reduce problematic social media use by helping students develop a different relationship with difficult thoughts and emotions.

Conclusion

The outcomes provide support for the potential usefulness of ACT in decreasing social media addiction and psychological inflexibility among students. The findings suggest that ACT-based interventions can be integrated into nursing student counseling programs to manage social media addiction, improving psychological flexibility can help reduce the negative impact of social media addiction on their mental well-being. mentally healthy nursing students may be able to provide better quality patient care in the future Though, the outcomes must be interpreted carefully because of the small sample size and single-institution setting.

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