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Exploring University Student's Experience of Self-Regulation and Mental Wellbeing in Context of Short Form Social Media Engagement: Investigating the Challenges

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ABSTRACT
The current qualitative work investigates how university students self-regulate and experience well-being when using short-form content engagement (SFCE) on social media platforms such as YouTube Shorts, TikTok and Instagram Reels. Fifteen participants (aged 19-27) were interviewed as part of a series of semi-structured interviews and data were analyzed using (Braun and Clarke's 2006) systematic approach to thematic analysis. The deductive method was followed and informed by the literature of digital engagement and psychological well-being. Three key themes were noted: (1) Helix of Scrolling, representing the routine and immersive aspect of SFCE use; (2) Adrift or Docked Up, (3) paralleling how students were trying to control their utilization, either consciously or through inner battles; (3) Digital Comfort Zones, illustrating that SFC was both an emotional escape and a mental burden. Some students used active tactics such as app restrictions or mindful breaks, others said they felt overwhelmed or emotionally splintered. Results underscore the two-sided role of SFCE—both as coping and as a stressor—and emphasize the value of educational interventions promoting digital literacy and healthy online practices in the university students.

Keywords: *SFC (Short Form Content), Well-Being, Self-Regulation, Emotions, Reels, Engagement, SFCE (Short Form Content Engagement), Students*

Introduction

A fundamental component of human functioning, self-regulation aids in the effective pursuit of individual objectives. Both inside and outside of psychology, a wide range of ideas and models have been developed to explain various facets of self-regulation. The ever-changing process of choosing a desired end state, acting to achieve it, and tracking one's advancement along the path is known as self-regulation. The performer is referred to by the term "self." It could refer to a single business. However, it is more frequently used to refer to a collection of businesses acting together, such as through a trade organization, for the purposes of this article.11 The actor's actions are referred to as "regulation." Three elements make up regulation: (1) legislation, i.e., establishing suitable regulations (2) enforcement, including acting against offenders; and (3) adjudication, which includes determining if a violation has occurred and applying the proper penalty (Peter P. et al., 2019).

According to Tangney et al. (2004), self-regulation is the dispositional ability of the self to regulate three suitable adaptations to the external environment. It describes the capacity to control one's thoughts and feelings and to halt undesirable behavioral patterns (Mao et al., 2018). Low levels of self-regulation have been linked to frequent smartphone use, according to research (Berger et al., 2018; Cho et al., 2017; Mascia et al., 2020). It is important to investigate the relationship between behavioral attributes like self-regulation and smartphone addiction and how it affects people's self-regulation and general well-being, as research has shown a definite correlation between these traits and smartphone addiction.

Mental well-being is a condition where people experience emotional comfortable, have a healthy balance in their lives, and are capable of handling difficulties well. The fundamental idea of mental well-being includes not just the lack of mental illnesses but also encompasses contentment, happiness, and the capacity to make a constructive contribution to society. The theory highlights the significance of social, emotional, influence of environment on mental well-being (Rachmad, 2022).

The current technology environment is constantly changing. with an estimated 4.89 billion users on different networking and social media (SM) platforms. Apps like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok offer short-form video (SFV) material, which is video content in bite-sized chunks. Any video that is less than sixty seconds long is considered SFV content (West, 2024). These applications make it simple for users to produce and consume this kind of material, which is relatively new (Xing et al., 2019). According to a review, TikTok had over 1.7 billion active users by the end of 2023, with 37.3% of those users being between the ages of 18 and 25. This shows how widely utilized SFV apps are (Gil press, 2024).

Students use social media sites and apps for an average of 5.4 hours per day (Adgate, 2024). Overuse of social media can result in several mental health issues, like sadness, loneliness, and poor sleep quality (Mu et al., 2022).

Since the launch of Facebook and Myspace in 2003, social media has grown in popularity, but in recent years, a new trend has evolved. The internet is exploding with short-form content (SFC) (Siek & Fariz, 2023). The ever-increasing user base embraces its creative and amusing qualities, but researchers are just beginning to understand the possible harm that excessive use and addiction may do to one's wellbeing (Dudukovic et al., 2023). As young adults, university students are particularly prone to follow the trend and are thus greatly impacted by its effects. Self-regulation may be one of the most important determining elements when attempting to distinguish between good and harmful short-form content engagement (SFCE) (Reinecke et al., 2022).

TikTok and other short-form video programs (apps) have become extremely popular worldwide because to the rapid advancement of technology and the Internet. Usually lasting between one and five minutes, short-form videos have a clear topic and succinct information. They are usually less than fifteen minutes long (Yang et al., 2022). From January 2018 to November 2022, TikTok received 4 billion downloads worldwide, making it the most downloaded social media platform, according to GWI (2023) (Chen et al., 2020). Chinese short-form video apps, such as Douyin and Kwai, are the industry leaders in short-form video and have a significant local influence.

Up to 2022, 962 million people watched short-form videos, accounting for 91.5% of all Internet users (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2022). However, there were significant benefits and possible hazards associated with short-form videos' high effect (Chen et al., 2020).

People's quality of life, connections with others, and mental health have been demonstrated to be gravely threatened by excessive use of the Internet and other Internet-based applications, such as social networking sites and online gaming. In line with the problem, experts and the media have been paying more and more attention to widespread Internet addiction (Marin et al., 2021). However, a closer look is warranted because of certain Internet addictions, such as short-form video addiction (SFVA) (Chen et al., 2021).

Well-being "A state of well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community" is how the World Health Organization defines mental health (World Health Organization, 2024). Contrary to popular belief, the emphasis is on having a happy mental space rather than having no mental health issues. According to Lamers et al. (2011), this well-being can be separated into three categories: social, psychological, and emotional. Numerous links to SFCE can be made within these divisions. Happiness and the sensation of positive emotions are characterized by emotional well-being. It is evident from a review of the driving forces for SFCE that emotional health can be enhanced by creativity, enjoyment, and the gratification of basic needs (Lamers et al.,2011; Menon,2022).

The degree to which a person can function well in life is referred to as psychological well-being. According to Lamers et al. (2011), the primary elements and obstacles that enable people to reach their full potential and, consequently, maximize their psychological well-being are self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relationships with others, autonomy, and environmental mastery. SFCE has the potential to be a significant diversion from this route, even though it can help by providing a space where people can relate to the struggles of others and receive credit for their accomplishments (Dudukovic et al., 2023; Reinecke et al., 2022).

The degree to which an individual is performing successfully in a community setting is referred to as social well-being. According to Lamers et al. (2011), social actualization, social contribution, social integration, social coherence, and social acceptance are the dimensions used to measure this. Without a doubt, social media has a role in creating a sense of belonging to a community where one is accepted, integrated, and able to contribute. It is yet unclear, though, to what degree this also holds true for SFCE. Social well-being can also be adversely affected by social media's ability to replace offline social contact activities (Reinecke et al., 2022). It begs the question of what elements determine whether SFCE has a favorable or negative impact on well-being.

Self-regulation Although research on the elements that influence the association between SFCE and well-being is still in its infancy, studies on social media in general that do not specifically focus on SFC can serve as a source of inspiration. When examining how social media use affects wellbeing, self-regulation is a crucial factor to consider. "Determining a desired end state (i.e., a goal) and then taking action to move towards it while monitoring progress along the way" is the definition of self-regulation (Reinecke et al., 2022). It functions as a monitoring mechanism that attempts to minimize any potential disparities between an individual's present goals and their current level of activity. When there is a difference between goals and actions, self-control, a type of self-regulation, is triggered. "Capacity to interrupt undesirable behavioral tendencies (like impulses) and to override or modify one's inner responses" is how (Reidecke et al., 2022) define it. It has been demonstrated that self-regulation and self-control enhance both mental and physical health. Another facet of self-regulation is emotion regulation, which is the process of altering the type or strength of emotional states. Because SFCE can be used to control stress and

anxiety, such as coping with pandemic-related stress or through self-improvement, the results of common social media usage suggest that it plays a key part in mood regulation.

However, social media use is riskier due to its rewarding aspects. Because they are easily accessible, the immediate rewards make them an extremely alluring short-term substitute for more difficult actions that are aimed at reaching long-term objectives (Reinecke et al., 2022). Social media use can jeopardies effective self-regulation even in the absence of a conflict between objectives and actions. It's conceivable that people would approach social media hedonistically, giving it unthinking attention without giving it any thought. Being aware of one's attention state and being able to control how one's attention is directed are both components of self-regulation, which includes the ability to practice meta-attention (Wu, 2015).

The monitoring and implementation procedures that are essential for self-control and emotion regulation may be hampered if this is not done. Therefore, using social media might take the place of other activities that are necessary for promoting wellbeing, such sleep, physical activity, and offline social engagement. Additionally, people may be inwardly and outwardly distracted from other work by notifications or the want to utilize social media. An surge in social media use can be attributed to a number of factors, including perceived social pressure, connectivity expectations, the desire to always be present and responsive, and fear of missing out. Accordingly, using social media can clash with other goals, but when it isn't used, it can also clash with these fundamental demands (Reinecke et al., 2022). Self-control and motivation vary from person to person. This suggests that while poorly controlled social media use leads to goal-conflict by taking time away from or diverting from other activities, self-regulated social media use can promote mood management, emotion-focused coping, and the satisfaction of intrinsic needs. This demonstrates that self-regulation may modify the relationship between SFCE and well-being, with highly capable individuals showing a more positive or at least less negative association than those who are not. Therefore, it's important to consider the type of social media involvement while evaluating it (Reinecke et al., 2022).

Target Audience As young people, university students are a demographic that is especially exposed to SFC. According to Statista (2024), 64.3% of TikTok users are between the ages of 18 and 34, making them particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of SFCE. The target groups are interested in and involved with the social media trend for a variety of reasons. As a generation, they are among the first to have grown up in a technologically advanced environment. As a result of their familiarity with a rapidly evolving digital environment, they are drawn to and capable of swiftly embracing new technologies, such as SFC (Smith et al., 2020). University students are also continuously exposed to digital devices while they are studying. This is frequently linked to a chance to devote time to social media or SFC, implying that self-control is harmful to students' ability to perform (Wu, 2015). Their capacity to study is aided by self-regulation, but academic achievement and wellbeing are also strongly related. Returning to the self-determination hypothesis, academic success improves well-being and is best attained by having more study time (Bücker et al., 2018). On the other hand, improved academic achievement is also made possible by higher well-being since positive emotional states boost motivation, self-control, and learning capacity. These variables highlight the significance of comprehending the impact that SFCE has on this population, even though they only make up a small portion of the elements that contribute to notions like academic success and well-being (Bücker et al., 2018).

Short form Content

Short user-generated videos that last anything from a few seconds to a minute are what SFC (short form content) is known for. The videos can be seen vertically and scrolled through one after the other. They frequently have music. The largest platforms offering SFC at the moment are YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Since its global launch in 2018, TikTok has experienced exponential growth, overtaking Facebook as the app with the most minutes of monthly use globally. According to Statista (2024), 32% of Americans' social media app usage time is spent on TikTok alone. Because of this success, between 2020 and 2021, Instagram and YouTube launched their "Reels" and "Shorts" segments, which both solely concentrate on SFC. In contrast to TikTok, Reels and Shorts are integrated into YouTube and Instagram rather than existing as distinct apps. Both seem to be significant rivals of TikTok (Menon, 2022). Nowadays, interacting with SFC is a typical aspect of social media use, however it can happen in a variety of ways. First and foremost, content writers must be conversant with SFC. According to a study, Instagram accounts with more than 10,000 followers that regularly share reels expand 2.5 times more quickly than those who don't (Siek & Fariz, 2023). Because of this, developing SFC is one of the most crucial skills for anyone attempting to increase their internet reach. Second, consumers make up an even bigger group than content creators. They view, like, comment on, and distribute other users' videos. The size of this group was demonstrated by the fact that 694.000 reels were sent as direct messages every minute in December 2023 (Statista, 2024). Finally, a sizable portion of consumers can be categorized as "lurkers." This group doesn't actively participate or create; they just observe SFC (Siek & Fariz, 2023).

SFCE, as used in this study, refers to the amount of time spent creating SFC as well as the active participation—such as sharing, liking, or commenting—and passive consumption of SFC. Given how many people are using SFC for longer periods of time, it is critical to comprehend the psychological effects and ramifications of their usage patterns.

The Reasons for and Effects of SFCE It is necessary to evaluate the reasons why SFC platforms are so successful to comprehend how the effects of SFCE arise. In order to determine the driving forces underlying the use of Reels, Menon (2022) carried out a quantitative study including 540 users between the ages of 18 and 36. Socially rewarding self-promotion, amusement, escape, surveillance, novelty, documentation, and trendiness are the seven primary criteria that were identified (Menon, 2022).

The algorithms that SFC platforms employ, which show the user videos that are customized to their unique tastes and interests, strengthen the escapism thesis, which is commonly discussed in literature. Because these algorithms are so sophisticated, users can immerse themselves in what seems like an infinite number of films that suit their interests, providing them with a momentary reprieve from the bustle of daily life (Rach & Peter, 2021). Entertainment is one of the most significant factors for consumers, while producers gain from having a creative outlet and challenge (Dudukovic et al., 2023). The self-determination theory is a prominent framework for understanding human motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

While claiming that the social and cultural context contributes to the individual variables that promote or reduce motivation towards an action, it integrates elements of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. The satisfying of the demands for autonomy, competence and relatedness enhances wellbeing and makes the involvement with an activity attractive. The urge to be autonomous and to voice one's thoughts and feelings is a component of autonomy. The capacity to accomplish

objectives and carry out plans is referred to as competence. According to Ryan and Deci (2017), relatedness is the urge to feel protected from mental and physical damage while still being loved and accepted as a member of a group.

Furthermore, a person's well-being is severely harmed by a social environment that fails to satisfy these demands (Ferguson et al., 2015). One may argue that social media in general provides the chance to meet these fundamental demands (Reinecke et al., 2022). Therefore, producing expressive content, watching relatable videos, and getting help while sharing, commenting, or uploading SFC can all significantly contribute to well-being (Reinecke et al., 2022; Zilka, 2018). While there are several advantages to using SFC, excessive use is likely to eclipse these advantages with addiction and distraction.

High levels of SFCE are associated with a wide range of severe mental health problems, from self-harm and suicidal thoughts to anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Dudukovic et al., 2023).

Furthermore, escapism can be characterized as "a behavior employed to distract oneself from real life problems" (Young et al., 2017). This behavior has been described as a positive motivating factor that helps to lessen the stress of daily living. In this manner, SFCE can take on a distracting nature that makes boring or arduous work forgettable while also momentarily numbing more important issues like anxiety and despair (Kırcaburun & Griffiths, 2019). These incentives and outcomes demonstrate the positive and negative effects that SFCE can have on mental health.

Method

Purposive sampling and data saturation were employed in the study. With a focus on participants' subjective experiences and the interpretations they ascribe to them, the research question must adhere to the fundamentals of qualitative research. It must be an open-ended question that doesn't reveal the researcher's opinions about the investigation or foreshadow any conclusions. Given the exploratory nature of this qualitative study, the sample's lack of representativeness of all Pakistani university students was not regarded as a serious constraint. The number of participants necessary is determined by the amount of information gathered; as many themes as feasible are generated, and data saturation is reached when no new themes appear, meaning that no additional participants are needed (Guest et al., 2006).

Participants and Data Collection

The number of participants necessary is determined by the amount of information gathered; as many themes as feasible are generated, and data saturation is reached when no new themes appear, meaning that no additional participants are needed (Guest et al., 2006). The participants were asked to give interview and share their experience and view with the researcher. Participants voluntarily gave the interviews. They were making sure the confidentiality and no breach of any information they will provide. The data they will provide will solely be used for only research purposes.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the university students aged 19-27 years of age using an interview guide developed in accordance with the study's goals and objectives. To guarantee comfort and thoroughness of responses, each interview was audio recorded, verbatim transcribed, and done in either Urdu or English, depending on participant preference.

Data Analysis

Deductive thematic analysis, a qualitative technique that identifies themes throughout a data collection, was used to analyse the interviews. It makes it possible to examine the similarities among many discussions of the same subject. The six stages that (Braun and Clarke, 2012)

outlined were adhered to using the theme analysis approach. To guarantee their legitimacy and consistency with the data, the coding was done by hand and moderated.

A similarity of at least 80% (by simple percent agreement) amongst the researchers was attained by inter-rater reliability, indicating that the themes were trustworthy.

In the coding process, a code is a label that can be applied to segments of the interview that share a common meaning. Using the recording and the written copy of the interview, each one was coded separately. The development of codes produced a new framework for analysis and assisted in lowering the amount of data. Semantic codes were discovered for this investigation to describe every piece of data.

The surface meaning of the data is referred to using semantic codes (Braun & Clark,2006). A cutting and sorting technique was used to finish the coding (Gale et al, 2013). A coding system (Appendix) was produced because of this process, and families of codes came together to create the themes that are shown below.

Theoretical Framework

Research draws its conceptual foundation from the Student Well-Being Model Soutter O'Steen Gilmore (2013) established. Students experience well-being through lively interactions of four essential domains that integrate thinking and feeling with functioning and striving and being and relating alongside having throughout their lives. The domains of thinking and feeling maintain active feedback links that demonstrate how appraisals and actions form a continuous pattern of influence on well-being. The study about short-form social media engagement (SFCE) and self-regulation in relation to well-being uses this model to establish clear research interpretations. Participants reported addictive scrolling difficulties (Helix of Scrolling) which demonstrates dysregulation throughout their functioning and feeling aspects because emotional exhaustion combined with cognitive overload disrupts their ability to maintain goal-driven actions. Individuals who actively work on self-regulation methods (Adrift or Docked up) start to take steps which aim to regain equilibrium between thinking, feeling, and functioning operations. Users seek emotional safety through carefully selected uplifting digital content which creates links between both their interpersonal needs of connection and positivity (seeking connection and positivity) and their need to feel peaceful and meaningful (nurturing a sense of calm or meaning). Proof from Soutter et al.'s (2013) framework indicates that brief media consumption affects multiple student welfare dimensions including psychological health and identity construction together with social ties and individual growth. The figure is taken from the published article.

Figure 1.1

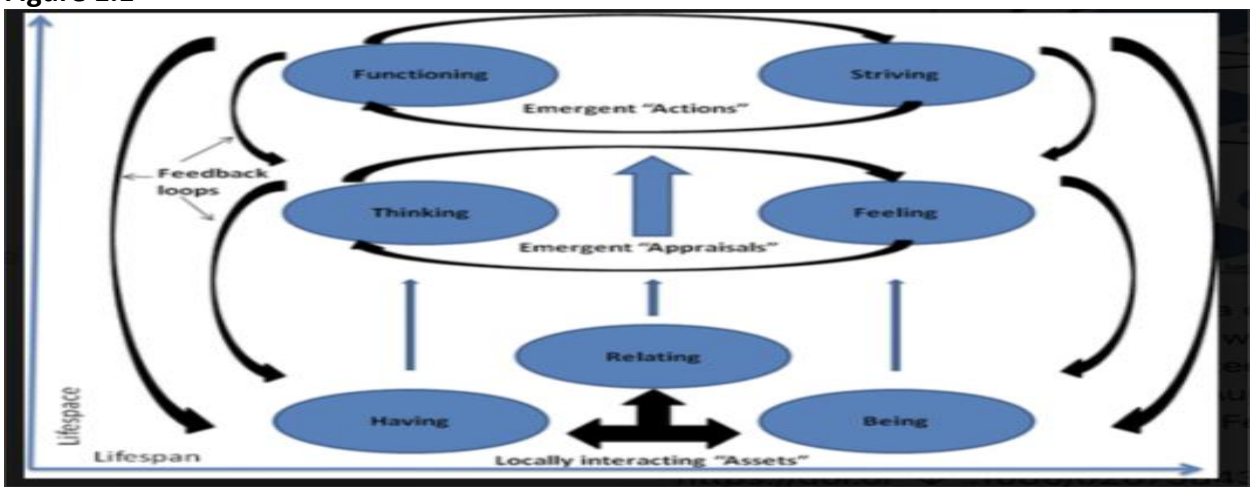
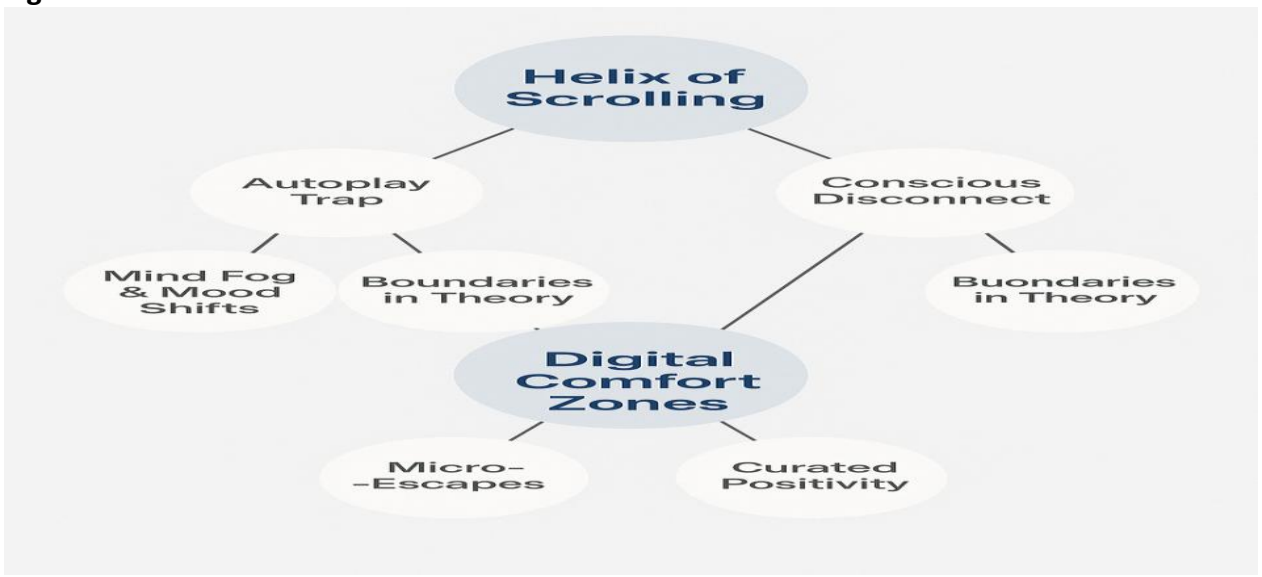


Figure 1.2



Results

Three main themes emerged while performing the thematic analysis of the data: *(1) Helix of Scrolling, (2) Adrift or Docked up, (3) Digital Comfort Zones.*

Core Theme: Helix of Scrolling

This theme delves into the fast-pace, addictive nature of student engagement with short-form content. Then there is the design of the SFC platforms themselves, with autoplay and algorithmic recommendations, which promote compulsive engagement and interrupt time perception and emotional equilibrium.

Subtheme 1.1: Auto play Trap

Participants explained how consumers are drawn into prolonged usage sessions by short-form platforms' algorithmic personalization and autoplay functionalities. These characteristics

interfered with time awareness, which frequently resulted in procrastination and decreased output:

"Sometimes you realize that it can be hard to manage time when you are addicted to social media things. It stays with you until the battery runs out, you know." (Interview 6)

"I don't even know where one hour or two hours go, I get so engrossed in it." (Interview 5)

"Autoplay and personalized recommendations are huge triggers… A line of interesting, accurately tailored content keeps me scrolling for much longer than I meant to." (Interview 10)

Even participants with a moderate pattern of social media use acknowledged occasional instances of unintentional overuse because of platform algorithms:

"I'm on the app more than I would like to be, and sometimes I spend a little more time than I mean to scroll through reels, but not so much that it's an issue." (Interview 11)

Subtheme 1.2: mood Shifts & Mind Fog

Vast emotional differences were described when comparing during and post SFC use: Several respondents commented on Variation in emotional experiences of during SFC use, versus post SFC use Exposure to the variety of content also led to emotional exhaustion, overstimulation, and brain fog:

"Yes, social media really affects my mood. Sometimes it makes me happy, and other times it makes me feel sad. For example, I really enjoy reading about space. Everything about it attracts me, and I find it so interesting. Watching those videos or reading about it makes me happy and keeps me engaged, wanting to know more. But sometimes, I come across stressful news, like someone's death or an accident, or emotional videos that make me feel down. It's like a mix of emotions, with both happiness and sadness coming from different kinds of content." (Interview 1)

"Sometimes I easily get mentally tired and less likely to do other things after watching reels for a while. (Interview 2)

"Even the good news doesn't feel good anymore. That leads to frustration." (Interview 9)

These swings in attitude were closely related to algorithmically modeled suggestions that put forth extremely individualized content:

"If I see something sad, then it makes me upset … I become angry very easily and feel irritated all the time." (Interview 8)

"Extended screen time disrupts my sleep cycle totally. My sleep pattern gets extremely disturbed due to excessive use of screen time". (Interview 5)

Core Theme 2: Adrift or docked up

This subtheme illustrates differences among participants in their ability to self-regulate their use of SFC. Some had managed to successfully employ intentional tactics, whereas others said they often caved in and felt guilty.

Subtheme 2.1: Conscious Disconnect

Several participants reported intentionally striving to make a conscious effort in reducing SFC use, by setting digital limits, deleting apps, and 'doing something else offline':

I also limit notifications and use apps to regulate screen time … I just try to focus on my priorities instead. (Interview 1)

"Getting home workouts or meeting up with friends instead of consuming screen time helps." (Interview 10)

"I try to stay away from the phone by leaving it as far as I can from me - doing Chores to get away with it!" (Interview 6)

For some the demands of academia and structured schedules naturally limited their exposure:

I hardly use my social [media] as it is, I can go days without. (Interview 11)

"When it was exam time or there were busy periods... it was hard at first, but it felt good after, like mentally refreshing." (Interview 3)

Subtheme 2.2: Boundaries in Theory

On the other hand, the respondents also admitted to living a regulate life; frequently they do not follow the bounds they establish:

"After imposing these restrictions on usage of these apps, I forgot about it, and I returned to my old habits." (Interview 12)

"The strategies are good, but the hardest thing is doing it all the time." (Interview 3)

"Even when I realize I'm using a certain app too much; I'll just uninstall it or put my phone away … then reinstall. (Interview 9)

A couple mentioned internal struggles -- which they knew what a mess they get into when they log on, but they couldn't resist:

"Sometimes I use it more to not think about something or feel something … but if I want, I can stop using it. (Interview 5)

"Self-regulation is hard, but I try… it's a challenge, especially with people who constantly remind you, 'Did you see what we posted?' "(Interview 9)

Core Theme 3: Digital Comfort Zone

This theme represents the emotional interest of short formats for students. Although some claimed it for escapism, others described how content curation reflected emotional or intellectual requirements.

Subtheme 3.1: Micro-Escapes

Short-form content served as a mental break from the emotional weight of stress, loneliness or overthinking when it came to one's education:

"I go to these apps to retreat from the world to get some time to myself." (Interview 1)

"Life's a bit of a grind for me these days, and when I'm tired or stressed, this feels like the perfect escape from my life as it stands today. (Interview 1)

"It takes away my negative thoughts… but after a while, what was absorbing becomes a trap." (Interview 9)

"Short-form media is used to bring attention to global crises... and it makes me feel connected to the world." (Interview 7)

Subtheme 3.2: Cultivated Positivity

Although demonstrating the bad with the good has been the focus of most posts on the chronicle theme, there are posts which embody the curated side of positivity.

Finally, some shared that they were deliberately engaging with motivational, spiritual or calm content to feel uplifted:

"Some things will be hilarious or really light-hearted and that really raises my spirits." (Interview 1)

"I mostly watch motivational or psychology-related things. It's all for relaxation." (Interview 5)

I just like to use my cellphone to kill time… and less is study-related and a little bit of people's reels. (Interview 8)

Others pointed out that content that reinforced personal beliefs or spiritual beliefs brought peace and clarity:

"Ever since I was getting older, when tough life circumstances came along, I was frustrated, and I went on social to see what is religious and important." (Interview 4)

In summary, the findings indicate a nuanced and complicated engagement with short-form content among university students. The stories spin out in this labyrinth of stimulus and depletion, purposeful use and habit adding up to craving and addiction, escapism and control.

Discussions

The present study examined university students' self-regulation and well-being experiences during SFCE. Thematic analysis of student interviews generated three interrelated themes—Helix of Scrolling, Anchored or Adrift, and Digital Comfort Zones—that illuminate how technological design, emotional requirements, and regulation strategies coalesce to shape media use and psychological well-being. These findings provide a detailed understanding of how SFCE affects the mental states of students, sometimes ambivalently and paradoxically.

Helix of Scrolling was representative of how addictive and absorbing SFCE was, the Autoplay Trap and the Mind Fog & Mood Shifts that went along with it. Students repeatedly described the way in which autoplay, and infinite scroll led them to "lose track of time" or "just keep watching," echoing the findings presented in Huang et al. (2022), who explained the role of algorithmic affordances (e.g., multimodality and autoplay) in addictive stirrings. But these tech hooks breed a sort of temporal disassociation, in which students (overly) see and report brief use, yet many hours of unintentional engagement at play (Guangming Daily, 2021). Notably, such unchecked use often led to mood swings of short-lasting joy, with subsequent guilt and anxiety—consequences also documented by Liu et al. (2021) where SFCE was associated with emotional dysregulation, poor sleep, and lower MWB.

The theme Adrift or Docked up referred to students' self-regulation. Others were doing Conscious Disconnect, such as using the app timers, taking breaks, or substituting scrolling for more physical activity—tactics that echo mindfulness-based regulation and digital detox movements (Vogtmeier, 2024). But others were given perspective on the disconnect, between intention and outcome, that Boundaries in Theory offered. Students reported setting boundaries "in their minds," only to lapse back into use because of stress, boredom or emotional exhaustion. This trend is consistent with Xie et al. (2023) that reports that the role of attentional control as a mediator in the association between SFC addiction and academic procrastination is significant, especially when boredom proneness is high. Furthermore, students who were fully aware of the negative consequences of their actions were still loathed to regulate and, as such, there is a strong need for interventions to develop their behavioral and emotional regulation systems.

Digital Comfort Zones was evidence of how students engage in emotional self-soothing with SFCs. Micor-Escapes In terms of Micro-Escapes, there were reports of using SFCs in times of distress, fatigue, or loneliness, illustrating the concept of escapism as a transient barrier to real-life problems (Kırcaburun & Griffiths, 2019). Some saw it as a coping mechanism, while others recognized the longer-term price: disengagement from academic goals, lost opportunities for social responsibility. This is consistent with a recent work by Dudukovic et al. (2023) who found SFCE are associated with emotional dependent, depressive symptoms, and decreased well-being.

But not every usage configuration was harmful. In the Curated Positivity sub-theme, participants referred to seeking out motivational, spiritual, or fact-based content to enhance mood and perspective. This reflects Reinecke et al. allerman-Jorswieck and Oscar-Berman 's (2022) argument that the fact that someone can find expressive, relevant content and peer approval serves as a psychological regulator to such needs as autonomy, competence, and relatedness— core dimensions of well-being according to Ryan and Deci (2017). But the space between good use and helpless dependence was frequently attenuated.

Taken together, the results advance the literature on the idea that SFE is not simply good or bad but that it has both positive and negative impact, which depends on both the design and prescript of the platforms and the (mental and emotional) state, goals, and personality of the users (Wang et al., 2023; Mohan et al., 2024). This study adds depth to a fledgling qualitative knowledge-based on these dynamics, exposing complex student experiences beneath quantitative models in place. **Limitations**

The present study's limitations Although this study offers valuable insights into the experiences of SFCE among university students, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Research external validity is restricted by a small sample of 15 university students within a specific cultural and academic setting (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Social desirability bias and retrospective recall errors typically occur in qualitative self-report research according to Braun and Clarke (2006) and could affect the participants' self-report data. The structured approach of deductive thematic analysis might have restricted the discovery of fresh unexpected themes according to Braun and Clarke (2012). Additional culturally sensitive research is needed because religious content as a coping behavior emerged organically from analysis results but was not the main analytical focus (Kırcaburun & Griffiths, 2019; Reinecke et al., 2022). In terms of generalizability, the study has limitations. It is based on a sample size of 15 participants in a particular educational and cultural context, which may limit generalization. In keeping with Guest et al. (2006), however, it appeared that "enough is enough." Respondents were also asked to self-report information, which could be impacted by social desirability or recall bias effects. Furthermore, cross-lagged analyses are not possible due to the cross-sectional study design, which precludes drawing inferences about how self-regulation or wellbeing evolves over time.

Implications

Several important implications can be anticipated. It provides a nuanced insight into the mental health problems and coping responses related to SFCE, which include maladaptive patterns such as attention fatigue and mood shifts as well as adaptive responses (e.g., digital detox and motivational content use).

User attention control and self-regulation affected by short-form video platforms because of the automated features and user engagement designs development as confirmed by the previous research (Yan, 2024; Huang et al., 2022). The presented data indicates that electronic platforms and personal strategies need to develop healthier digital practices together. The results indicate the necessity of targeted information, and of prevention, and intervention for universities and mental health services in subjects regarding mindful media usage of students. And platform developers could include features focused on user well-being, such as personalized time limits and purposeful content curation.

Student support services in educational institutions and mental health practices need to implement digital literacy training and self-regulation education which teaches students about

algorithmic manipulation while also guiding them on content selection strategies (Dudukovic et al., 2023; Siek & Fariz, 2023). There is a dire need for future research that needs to use longitudinal or mixed method designs to understand the relationship SFCE change over the time because recently provided evidence reveals that exploited mental health results from excessive digital exposure (Twenge & Campbell,2018; Dudukovic et al., 2023).

Notably, longitudinal or mixed methodologies might be applied for further research to ascertain changes in SFCE and its long-term effects on students' academic achievement, well-being that include the domains of emotional, mental and psychological in a wider and heterogeneous student body.

Conclusion

The present study investigated university students' use of short-form social media and their self-regulation and well-being, which uncovered a nuanced pattern linking psychological needs, online behavior, and affective consequences. But analyses revealed that short-form content environments frequently generate a Helix of Scrolling, characterized by formulaic algorithms and emotionally volatile consumption patterns. May} mean, students may show diverse self-regulatory behaviors, from mindfully disconnecting to not exerting control at all (see Docks Up or Room to Drift). At the same time there are lots of students who retreat to their Digital Comfort Zones, where selected curated content provides emotional solace and escape from the pressure of both studies and personal life.

These attitudes reflect the two sides of media exposure on short forms, distraction and emotional support. Programs that foster digital literacy, self-regulation, and value-based content engagement may provide a mechanism for students to take advantage of the positive element of these platforms, while at the same time minimizing potential harms to mental well-being. We encourage researchers to further explore these dynamics in other populations and changing digital landscapes.

Appendices

Codes	Description
Escapism	Short content as an escape from stress, boredom, feelings of negativity, and schoolwork.
Emotional Overload	Accounts of feeling overstimulated, exhausted or burnt out after marathon scroll sessions
Mood Lifting Content	Turn to spiritual, inspiring or relaxing videos to enhance your mood or emotional state
Academic Disruption	Discussions of short-form content getting in the way of studying, attention, or procrastination

Failed Regulation Attempts	References to attempts (and failures) to use techniques to reduce screen time
Social With drawl Strategies	Doing the other stuff: Going for walks, doing chores or hanging out with the family, or anything that doesn't involve devices.
Self-Awareness of Impact	Reflections on psychological and emotional impacts of media use (e.g. guilt, frustration, recognition of addiction)
Intentional Limiting	Creating app timers, muting notifications, or deleting them as a deliberate limit-setting plan to self-regulate themselves
Physical symptoms of Overuse	Physical effects of too much screen time Headaches, eyestrain, or even exhaustion discussed as possible physical effects of spending time on the computer
Sleep Disruption	References to poor-quality sleep, bedtime delays, or irregular sleep timing associated with SFC use
Algorithmic Pull	Calls to autoplay, infinite scroll, or recommendations that encourage extended usage
Mixed Emotional Responses	Emotional fluctuation while or after use, such as positive (amusement, relaxation) and negative (anxiety, sadness) reactions
Time Distortion	hearing from users that they lost track of time on our platform captivated watching short form videos (reels, YouTube shorts)

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