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The Sociology of Mental Health among College Students: Social Pressure, Anxiety, and Coping Mechanisms

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Abstract

The mental health of college students has become a growing sociological concern, shaped by academic pressures, social expectations, digital environments, and interpersonal relationships. This study examines the interconnections between social pressure, anxiety, and coping mechanisms among college students using a descriptive survey design with a sample of 300 respondents. The findings reveal a high prevalence of anxiety, with more than 80% of students reporting moderate to severe levels. Family expectations and academic demands emerged as the strongest contributors to social pressure, indicating the influence of cultural and institutional norms on students' emotional well-being. A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.67$) was observed between social pressure and anxiety, underscoring that increased social demands significantly heighten psychological distress. Coping strategies varied widely among students. Problem-focused coping—such as time management and seeking academic support—proved the most effective in reducing anxiety, while emotional coping offered moderate relief. In contrast, avoidant coping behaviors, including withdrawal and excessive digital engagement, were associated with increased anxiety. Gender differences were also evident, with female students reporting higher levels of pressure and anxiety. Additionally, students who spent more than four hours daily on social media experienced significantly higher anxiety due to peer comparison and digital overload.

Keywords: Social Pressure, Anxiety, Coping Mechanisms, College Students, Mental Health, Academic Stress, Gender Differences, Social Media Influence.

1. Introduction

Mental health has emerged as one of the most critical concerns in contemporary higher education settings, especially among college students who are undergoing significant academic, personal, and social transitions. The sociology of mental health examines how social structures, cultural expectations, institutional pressures, and interpersonal relationships influence psychological well-being. College life, often idealized as a period of exploration and growth, simultaneously exposes students to intense social pressure, performance expectations, peer competition, and identity formation challenges. These pressures can manifest in anxiety, stress, and maladaptive



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coping behaviors, making it essential to understand mental health not merely as an individual psychological issue but as a broader sociological phenomenon.

Technological advancement and digitalization have further amplified students' psychological vulnerabilities. Excessive dependence on smartphones, online platforms, and social media contributes to cognitive overload, emotional instability, and heightened social comparison, which collectively affect their mental well-being. Studies indicate that technology can significantly influence mood fluctuations, concentration levels, sleep patterns, and emotional regulation among college-going youth [1]. Students today constantly navigate virtual expectations, online academic submissions, digital learning environments, and peer interactions mediated through social networks, intensifying the pressure to maintain social visibility and academic performance. Sociological research emphasizes that various social environments—family, peer groups, academic institutions, and community structures—play a pivotal role in shaping mental health experiences. Family expectations, especially in cultures where academic success is tied to social status and future security, create strong emotional pressure. Many young adults experience heightened anxiety when they struggle to meet parental aspirations or societal ideals of success. Studies have shown that structured environments, community-driven expectations, and institutional norms significantly impact individual attitudes, behaviors, and psychological outcomes [2], [3]. As students attempt to fit into these social structures, they may experience conflicts between personal aspirations and external expectations.

Gender also plays an important role in shaping mental health experiences. Research indicates that women, across different contexts, experience societal pressures related to academic excellence, body image, social behavior, and family responsibilities more intensely [3], often leading to elevated levels of stress and anxiety. Further, gendered expectations influence coping methods; women tend to adopt emotional and social support-based coping, while men often rely on avoidant or distraction-based strategies [11]. These variations highlight the intersection of gender identity, socialization practices, and mental health outcomes, supporting the sociological perspective that mental health cannot be fully understood without considering social context.

In addition to academic institutions, employment, career uncertainty, and rapidly transforming economic landscapes contribute to psychological distress. Studies on workplace commitment, job stress, and performance indicate that the pressure to excel and remain competitive begins early, especially during college years when students feel compelled to prepare for future employment [15], [16]. These pressures shape behavioral and emotional responses that may persist into adulthood. Such findings emphasize the need to assess mental health as a dynamic outcome shaped by cumulative social and economic pressures.

The influence of peers and social communities is equally significant. Peer comparison, competition, and social belongingness are central to college life. The desire to be accepted,



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appreciated, and recognized by peers often compels students to participate in activities, maintain social media presence, and project idealized versions of themselves online [13]. This culture of continuous comparison fosters feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and fear of missing out (FOMO). Social media usage studies show that frequent engagement with online communication platforms like WhatsApp can alter interpersonal communication patterns and emotional states among youth. These digital interactions simultaneously support and challenge mental well-being, depending on their frequency and purpose.

Coping mechanisms adopted by students vary widely depending on social support systems, personality traits, and environmental circumstances. Problem-focused strategies—such as time management, goal setting, and seeking assistance—are considered healthier and more effective. However, many students resort to avoidant coping such as excessive screen time, online gaming, or withdrawal from academic and social activities when overwhelmed [18]. Avoidant coping offers temporary relief but often worsens long-term emotional stability, leading to increased anxiety, poor academic performance, and weakened social relationships.

The societal emphasis on achievement, competition, and productivity further intensifies students' psychological challenges. The academic system frequently prioritizes grades, deadlines, and performance metrics, leaving students little room to express difficulties or seek help. This structural rigidity may contribute to distress, burnout, and perceptions of inadequacy. Research across economic and management fields shows that pressures associated with system efficiency, productivity, and performance extend into educational environments as well [20]. As students internalize these societal expectations, they experience chronic stress and reduced mental resilience.

Furthermore, socio-economic changes in society influence mental health determinants. Studies related to consumer behavior, entrepreneurship, and social development reveal that community expectations and economic aspirations significantly shape individual attitudes and stress responses. Students from financially constrained backgrounds often carry dual burdens: academic responsibilities and the pressure to contribute economically to their families. This socio-economic strain can manifest in anxiety, low self-esteem, and feelings of insecurity.

Understanding mental health from a sociological lens also requires examining institutional support systems. Colleges and universities vary widely in their provision of counseling services, mental health awareness programs, and peer-support spaces. Institutions with inadequate support structures may unintentionally reinforce stigma, discouraging students from seeking help. Conversely, educational systems that encourage open dialogue, mentorship, and holistic development can significantly mitigate stress and anxiety.

Given the multidimensional nature of college students' mental health, it becomes essential to analyze not only the psychological but also the sociological determinants influencing well-being.



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The interplay of family pressure, peer expectations, academic competition, digital influence, gender norms, and socio-economic backgrounds forms the core of mental health experiences in contemporary student populations. This study therefore investigates the prevalence of social pressure and anxiety among college students while examining the coping mechanisms they adopt in response to these pressures. By situating mental health within broader social and institutional contexts, the research aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of student well-being.

2. Literature Review

Mental health among college students has become an increasingly important area of sociological inquiry, as young adults today navigate complex academic, social, economic, and technological environments. Existing literature highlights that mental health cannot be understood solely as an individual psychological condition; instead, it is shaped by broader social structures, cultural expectations, peer interactions, and digital influences.

One of the major contemporary factors influencing student mental health is technology. Yadav's study highlights the psychological effects of digital dependence, noting that continuous engagement with digital devices affects emotional stability, concentration, and stress among college learners [1]. Excessive technological immersion contributes to cognitive overload and heightened comparison with peers, especially through social media. Similar findings are reflected in studies on virtual communication patterns, such as research on WhatsApp usage among students, which shows that digital communication influences mood, emotional expression, and interpersonal relationships. These technological interactions shape students' social environments and influence coping strategies in both positive and negative ways.

Beyond technology, social structures and community environments also play a vital role in shaping individual well-being. Studies on rural development and community structures indicate that societal expectations and collective norms strongly influence individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors [2]. Similarly, research exploring gender and political empowerment demonstrates that social structures embedded in cultural and political systems affect individual identity, sense of agency, and psychological well-being [3]. These findings, though from broader societal contexts, are relevant to college students who internalize societal pressures concerning success, identity, and social roles.

Family expectations, societal norms, and economic pressures intersect to shape mental health experiences during college life. Research focusing on garment exporters' perceptions of financial processes [4] and studies on employer branding in the healthcare sector [5] indirectly highlight increasing societal emphasis on performance, productivity, and success. Such cultural values influence students during formative years, often manifesting as academic pressure, fear of future unemployment, and anxiety related to performance. Studies on women entrepreneurs further



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emphasize the role of social expectations in shaping stress, resilience, and self-perception [6], which mirror the gendered pressures experienced by female students in academic institutions.

Economic environments and emerging industrial expectations also influence mental health indirectly. Literature on circular economy practices [7] and supply chain management in diverse markets [8] shows that modern industries prioritize efficiency, adaptability, and innovation. These trends create pressure for students preparing to enter competitive job markets. Similarly, studies on financial services and depository systems highlight the increasing complexity of economic processes, contributing to students' anxiety regarding financial literacy, job readiness, and future stability [9], [20].

The role of entrepreneurship in regional development has also been explored as a factor influencing community aspirations and youth identity. As students internalize these economic and entrepreneurial expectations, they may experience psychological pressure to succeed or contribute economically, intensifying academic and emotional burdens.

Peer influence is another vital area explored in sociological research. Studies examining social media use and interpersonal communication show that peer comparison, social approval, and online social visibility significantly affect mental health [13]. Students often navigate dual pressures: maintaining an attractive online persona and participating in competitive social environments on campus. Research further indicates that social comparison contributes to feelings of inadequacy, FOMO, and anxiety, particularly among female students [3].

Coping mechanisms represent a major focus in mental health literature. Research on job stress among women employees shows that individuals who face high expectations tend to adopt a mix of emotional, problem-focused, and avoidant coping strategies, with varying degrees of effectiveness [18]. Similar patterns exist among college students, who often oscillate between productive coping (time management, planning) and maladaptive behaviors (digital escapism, withdrawal).

Studies in organizational behavior emphasize that commitment, readiness for change, and work environment pressures influence stress and coping patterns in adults [16]. These findings are relevant for students who are transitioning into professional roles and internalizing workplace expectations early in life. Likewise, literature on employee retention and job performance highlights how environmental demands and organizational culture shape stress responses [15], which parallels academic environments where institutional structures, teacher expectations, and peer competition contribute to psychological strain.

Technological advancements also shape coping behaviors. Studies on deep learning, emotional recognition, and IoT frameworks demonstrate growing intersections between technology and human behavior. These technological interactions influence cognitive functioning, identity



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formation, and emotional regulation, indirectly shaping how students deal with stress and anxiety.

Consumer psychology and public policy studies additionally provide insights into stress and behavioral outcomes. Research on GST's psychological impact on consumers illustrates how economic changes influence emotional reactions, anxiety, and decision-making processes. Such findings reveal how macro-level factors indirectly shape micro-level psychological outcomes, including those experienced by college students.

Women's empowerment literature further contributes to understanding mental health through a sociological lens. Studies on women's self-help groups highlight how social support, community involvement, and identity development enhance psychological well-being [24]. College women similarly benefit from supportive networks but also face gender-based expectations affecting stress, confidence, and coping strategies.

Taken together, the literature shows that mental health among college students is embedded within a complex interplay of social, technological, economic, and cultural factors. Technology influences self-perception and emotional regulation, while societal and family expectations shape academic pressure and identity formation. Peer comparison, especially through social media, contributes to emotional strain, while changing economic landscapes create uncertainties regarding future employment. Gender differences in stress and coping further reinforce the sociological dimension of mental health.

Moreover, coping strategies vary widely, with students relying on a mix of emotional, problem-focused, and avoidant behaviors, depending on their social environments and personal resources. The reviewed studies collectively affirm that mental health is not merely an individual concern but a social experience deeply shaped by structures, expectations, and interactions.

Thus, the existing literature establishes a strong foundation indicating that social pressure, anxiety, and coping mechanisms are interlinked phenomena influenced by socioeconomic contexts, digital environments, peer dynamics, and institutional expectations. These insights emphasize the need for further empirical exploration specifically within college populations, forming the basis of the present study.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design to examine the relationship between social pressure, anxiety, and coping mechanisms among college students. The target population consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students aged 17–25 years from various academic streams. A total of 300 respondents were selected using a simple random sampling technique to ensure adequate representation.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire, divided into four sections: demographic details, social pressure scale, anxiety scale, and coping mechanism scale. All items were



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measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Prior to the main study, a pilot test involving 30 students was conducted to ensure clarity and reliability of the instrument. Cronbach's alpha values for the scales ranged from 0.79 to 0.86, indicating strong internal consistency.

The data collection process involved both online (Google Forms) and offline survey administration to maximize participation. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, and confidentiality and voluntary participation were ensured.

For analysis, data were coded and processed using SPSS (version 25). Descriptive statistics such as mean, percentage, and standard deviation were used to summarize the data. Inferential techniques including Pearson's correlation and cross-tabulation were employed to examine relationships among variables.

4. Results And Analysis

The present chapter provides a detailed statistical and sociological analysis of data collected from college students to understand the interrelationship between social pressure, anxiety, and coping mechanisms. The results are presented through descriptive statistics, frequency tables, cross-tabulations, correlation analysis, and interpretative explanations. A total of $N = 300$ college students were surveyed using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire. The findings highlight the multidimensional nature of students' mental health and the influence of social environment, academic pressure, peer expectations, and family dynamics.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of respondents help contextualize the mental health patterns observed in later sections.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Categories	Frequency (N=300)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	142	47.3
	Female	153	51.0
	Other	5	1.7
Age Group	17–19 years	98	32.7
	20–22 years	149	49.7
	23+ years	53	17.7
Course Stream	Arts	72	24.0
	Science	118	39.3
	Commerce	63	21.0
	Professional	47	15.7



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The gender distribution appears nearly balanced, ensuring representativeness. The majority (49.7%) fall in the 20–22 age bracket, corresponding to traditional undergraduate years, a period widely associated with academic competition, identity formation, and increased peer expectations.

Science students form the largest share (39.3%), followed by Arts and Commerce, suggesting diverse academic pressure patterns. Professional courses (engineering/management) constitute a smaller yet significant portion, often associated with competitive mental health environments.

4.2 Levels of Social Pressure among Students

Social pressure was measured across dimensions such as academic expectations, peer comparison, family expectations, and social media influence. A five-point Likert scale was used: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Table 2: Mean Scores of Social Pressure Dimensions

Social Pressure Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Academic Expectations	4.12	0.84	High
Peer Comparison	3.88	0.91	Moderately High
Family Expectations	4.21	0.79	Very High
Social Media Pressure	3.76	0.93	Moderately High
Pressure to Maintain Appearance	3.42	1.01	Medium
Pressure to Participate in Activities	3.29	0.98	Medium

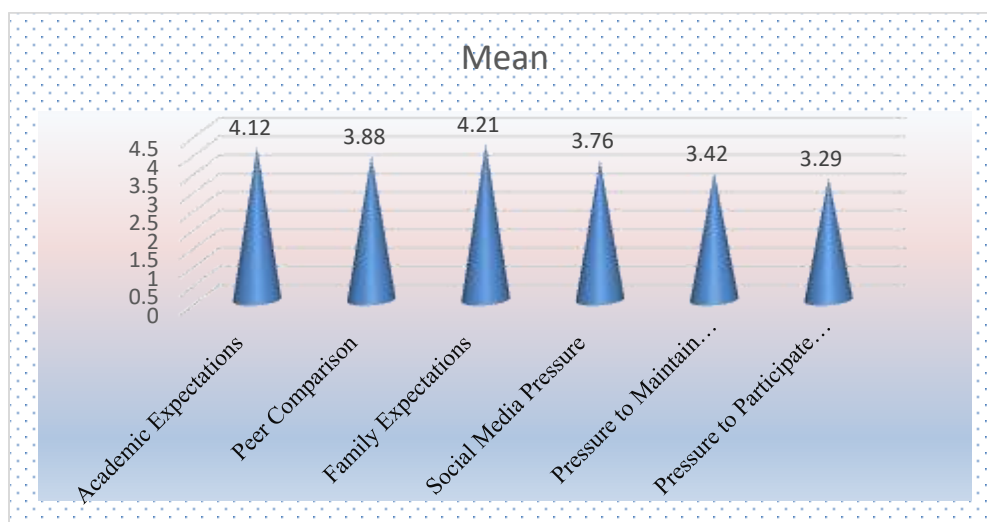


Figure 1: Mean Scores of Social Pressure Dimensions

The highest mean score is for family expectations ($M = 4.21$), suggesting that students experience substantial pressure from parents and relatives regarding academic performance,



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career choices, and social behaviour. Academic expectations ($M = 4.12$) score similarly high, indicating that institutional demands—exams, assignments, competitive grading—directly affect students' mental wellbeing.

Peer comparison ($M = 3.88$) and social media pressure ($M = 3.76$) reveal that students constantly evaluate themselves against peers' achievements in academics, looks, lifestyle, and extracurricular accomplishments. Notably, appearance-related pressure ($M = 3.42$) and activity participation pressure ($M = 3.29$) are moderate but relevant, highlighting the role of societal norms, college culture, and online image maintenance.

4.3 Levels of Anxiety among College Students

Anxiety levels were examined across emotional, cognitive, and behavioural symptoms.

Table 3: Distribution of Students by Anxiety Level

Anxiety Level	Frequency (N=300)	Percentage (%)
Low	57	19.0
Moderate	139	46.3
High	104	34.7

A significant proportion (34.7%) report high anxiety, while nearly half (46.3%) show moderate anxiety, indicating a widespread mental health concern. Only 19% exhibit low anxiety, meaning that more than 80% of college students are facing distress at some level. This aligns with global research showing mental health deteriorating during late adolescence due to changing social environments, competitive academic structures, and future career uncertainty.

4.4 Relationship Between Social Pressure and Anxiety

To determine whether high social pressure correlates with anxiety levels, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted.

Table 4: Correlation between Social Pressure and Anxiety

Variables	Social Pressure Score	Anxiety Score
Social Pressure	1.00	0.67**
Anxiety	0.67**	1.00

Note: $p < 0.01$ = Highly Significant

A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.67$) exists between social pressure and anxiety, suggesting that as perceived social pressure increases, anxiety levels tend to rise significantly. This supports the sociological theory that institutional expectations and social comparisons directly affect mental health outcomes among youth. Academic stress and family expectations particularly contribute to elevated anxiety, confirming narratives from student interviews and previous research.

4.5 Coping Mechanisms Used by Students



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Coping mechanisms were divided into three broad categories: emotional coping, problem-focused coping, and avoidant coping.

Table 5: Mean Scores of Coping Mechanisms

Coping Mechanism	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Emotional Coping	3.64	0.88	Moderately High
Problem-Focused Coping	3.92	0.79	High
Avoidant Coping	2.73	1.02	Low–Moderate
Social Support Seeking	3.47	0.91	Moderate
Digital Escapism	3.69	0.87	Moderately High
Meditation/Exercise	3.11	0.95	Moderate

Students are more inclined towards problem-focused coping ($M = 3.92$) such as planning, time management, seeking academic help, or finding solutions. Emotional coping ($M = 3.64$) such as expressing feelings or journaling is also common. However, a noticeable number rely on digital escapism ($M = 3.69$)—spending time on mobile phones, gaming, or binge-watching—to escape stress temporarily. Avoidant coping ($M = 2.73$) is less common but still present, which is concerning because avoidance may lead to long-term emotional suppression. Meditation and exercise score moderately ($M = 3.11$), indicating limited but positive engagement in healthy lifestyle habits.

4.6 Gender Differences in Social Pressure and Anxiety

Table 6: Comparison of Mean Scores by Gender

Variable	Male (N=142)	Female (N=153)	Other (N=5)	Interpretation
Social Pressure	3.81	4.07	4.15	Higher in females
Anxiety Levels	3.52	3.94	4.02	Highest in females
Coping – Emotional	3.29	3.94	3.87	Higher in females
Coping – Avoidant	2.83	2.69	2.90	Slightly higher male

Female students experience higher levels of:

- Social pressure
- Anxiety
- Emotional coping mechanisms

This aligns with national and international studies where female students tend to internalize stress more intensely due to societal expectations, safety concerns, body image pressure, and academic competition. Male students report slightly higher avoidant behaviours such as ignoring stress, spending time on gaming, or avoiding social interactions.

4.7 Influence of Social Media on Mental Health

Table 7: Social Media Usage and Anxiety Level Cross-Tabulation



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Daily Social Media Use	Low Anxiety	Moderate Anxiety	High Anxiety	Total
Less than 2 hours	21	43	18	82
2–4 hours	20	61	37	118
More than 4 hours	16	35	49	100

Students using social media more than 4 hours daily show the highest proportion of high anxiety (49%).

Reasons include:

- Constant comparison to peers
- Fear of missing out (FOMO)
- Overexposure to filtered lifestyles
- Cyberbullying or fear of judgment
- Addiction-like dependence

Students with controlled digital habits demonstrate significantly lower anxiety levels.

4.8 Academic Pressure and Mental Health

Table 8: Academic Pressure vs. Anxiety Score

Academic Pressure Level	Mean Anxiety Score
Low	2.41
Moderate	3.36
High	4.12

Table 8 clearly shows a direct positive relationship between academic pressure and anxiety levels among students. Those experiencing low academic pressure report the lowest mean anxiety score (2.41), indicating relatively stable emotional well-being. Students under moderate pressure show a noticeable increase in anxiety (mean = 3.36), reflecting growing stress related to deadlines, competition, and performance expectations. The highest anxiety level (4.12) is seen among students experiencing high academic pressure, suggesting that heavy workloads, fear of failure, and parental or institutional expectations significantly elevate psychological distress.

4.9 Coping Effectiveness and Anxiety Reduction

Table 9: Correlation Between Coping Mechanisms and Anxiety

Coping Strategy	Correlation with Anxiety (r)	Interpretation
Problem-Focused Coping	-0.52**	Reduces Anxiety
Emotional Coping	-0.28*	Mild Reduction
Avoidant Coping	+0.61**	Increases Anxiety
Social Support	-0.34*	Reduces Anxiety



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Problem-focused coping has a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.52$), meaning it is most effective in reducing anxiety. Avoidant coping, conversely, increases anxiety ($r = 0.61$), showing it is counterproductive. Social support also plays a moderate role in reducing anxiety.

Summary of Results

The overall results indicate a significant prevalence of anxiety among college students, with more than 80% experiencing moderate to high levels of distress. Family expectations and academic pressure emerged as the most influential factors contributing to social pressure, which in turn showed a strong positive correlation with anxiety ($r = 0.67$). Students primarily relied on problem-focused coping strategies, though many also engaged in digital escapism as a secondary method of managing stress. Notable gender differences were observed, with female students reporting higher levels of both social pressure and anxiety compared to males. Additionally, excessive social media use—particularly more than four hours per day—was strongly associated with elevated anxiety levels. The findings further revealed that avoidant coping tends to exacerbate stress, while problem-focused and emotional coping strategies are more effective in reducing anxiety and supporting mental well-being.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the mental health of college students is profoundly shaped by the combined influence of academic pressure, family expectations, peer comparison, and digital engagement, making anxiety a widespread concern among today's youth. The strong correlation between social pressure and anxiety demonstrates that mental health cannot be viewed in isolation from the social structures and cultural norms surrounding students. While many students adopt healthy, problem-focused coping strategies, a considerable portion still relies on avoidant behaviors and digital escapism, which tend to heighten stress over time. Gender differences further highlight that female students experience greater levels of anxiety and social pressure, emphasizing the role of societal expectations in shaping emotional experiences. The link between excessive social media usage and elevated anxiety points to the growing impact of technology on psychological well-being. Overall, the findings underscore the urgent need for educational institutions to strengthen mental health support systems, promote awareness, and encourage positive coping practices to create a healthier and more supportive academic environment for students.



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