



## Relationship between Social Media Site related Social Overload, Digital Stress and Cognitive Flexibility among Young Adults

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**Abstract:** The popularity of social networking sites in the lives of young adults has had a tremendous effect on the manner in which they communicate and interact in real-life situations. As much as these platforms facilitate social connection, they also demand unending socialness from the user, a factor that may also cause increased stress and mental load. Despite the increasing focus on digital well-being, little has been done on how social overload and digital stress associated with the use of social networking sites can affect cognitive flexibility among young adults. This paper attempts to test the correlation between social networking site-related social overload, digital stress, and cognitive flexibility among 150 youth. The study used a cross-sectional research design, and the study variables were determined using standardized self-report measures. The results showed a significant positive correlation between social networking site-related social overload and digital stress, implying that higher online social requirements lead to greater stress. Moreover, social networking site-related social overload had a significant negative correlation with cognitive flexibility, although the correlation between digital stress and cognitive flexibility

was negative but not significant. These findings imply that excess social requirements in the digital world can lessen the capacity of individuals to think flexibly and adjust to new scenarios.

**Keywords:** *Social Networking Site–Related Social Overload, Digital Stress, Cognitive Flexibility, Young Adults, Social Networking Sites*

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Social Overload**

Social overload is a state of mind in which a person is overwhelmed with too much social pressure to the extent of not being able to meet its personal emotional and psychological capacities. This experience is particularly widespread in the modern digital society, when young adults have to operate with a variety of and intricate social relations. Social overload is a unique concept of stress which is not caused by the external pressures only, but the frequency and the intensity of the social interactions (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). Social overload does not merely entail the fact that one has more social contacts; the nature of the demand required of an individual is also a factor, as such demands might take time, emotional appeal, empathy, and effort to sustain relationships (Wright, 2017). Studies distinctly draw the line between social overload and information overload, as social overload is concerned with the emotional and relationship burden required to maintain social relationships (Koroleva et al., 2010).

The young adulthood, which is between 18–30 years of age, is an age of development defined by broadening roles in society and mounting demands of social participation and inclusion (Arnett, 2014). The digital platforms raise social pressures through expectations and constant connectivity, which tend to blur personal boundaries, and platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp transform interactions into constant contact where individuals feel pressure to respond quickly (Fox and Moreland, 2015). Extended social overload may result in emotional fatigue, anxiety, and burnout, and increased perceived social overload relates strongly to emotional exhaustion among young adults (Maier et al., 2015).

### **1.2 Digital Stress**

Digital stress can be interpreted in the form of a psychological burden caused by the constant connectivity, the need to operate a variety of apps simultaneously, and the necessity to keep up with the continuous communication with digital gadgets. It does not only relate to the

mental exhaustion caused by process large volumes of information but also emotional exhaustion through online actions, such as the urge to reply or keep a definite social image (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2021). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping shows that digital stress happens when people believe that the demands of technology surpass individual resources, which results in negative responses under the condition that there is no physical danger (Tarafdar et al., 2022).

The most dominant causes of digital stress include constant connectivity, information overload, dependence on technology, and pressure to perform online. Digital stress is especially common among young adults who spend large portions of their time in digital environments during important developmental transitions such as identity formation, career beginnings, and relationships (Twenge & Campbell, 2022; Orben & Przybylski, 2021). Stress is also found to impair emotional regulation and flexible thinking, increasing vulnerability to psychological difficulties (Cao et al., 2024; Diamond, 2022).

### **1.3 Cognitive Flexibility**

Cognitive flexibility refers to the capability to shift attitudes, vary reactions, and alter thinking depending on circumstances. It is based on areas of the brain such as the prefrontal cortex, particularly the dorsolateral (DLPFC) and anterior cingulate (ACC) sectors, which are involved in attention and task switching (Miyake et al., 2020). This cognitive dexterity enables individuals to alternate tasks or rules without becoming frozen and is commonly assessed through tests such as the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (WCST). Cognitive flexibility develops in young adults up to the early twenties and assists in making complex decisions, while inflexibility in thought is associated with greater anxiety (Colzato et al., 2022).

Cognitive flexibility plays an important role in adaptation and coping with stressful situations. It assists individuals in restating problems and developing effective coping strategies, helping them disengage from negative thought patterns and preventing rumination (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2022). However, stressful environments such as social overload and constant digital engagement may reduce cognitive flexibility by straining executive functions and dividing attention (Uncapher & Wagner, 2021). Studies indicate that high social demands on the internet and digital stress may contribute to reduced flexibility and depleted working memory among young adults (Ang et al., 2024).

The increasing use of social networking sites has intensified the social demands placed on young adults, which may contribute to experiences of social overload. When these excessive social demands are experienced repeatedly in digital environments, they may lead to higher levels of digital stress. Prolonged exposure to such stress may influence cognitive processes, particularly the ability to adapt thinking and shift responses in changing situations. Therefore, understanding the relationship between social overload, digital stress, and cognitive flexibility becomes important in explaining the psychological impact of social networking site use among young adults.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The theoretical framework of this study incorporates important models to describe the mechanisms by which social overload on SNS influences the digital stress and cognitive flexibility on young adults. It is a combination of concepts of stress appraisal, limited cognitive resources, and executive functioning, and suggests that this is a chain: excessive social demand leads to stress, which diminishes flexibility (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Sweller, 1988; Diamond, 2022). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping explains that digital stress occurs when individuals believe that the demands of technology surpass their resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The Cognitive Load Theory describes how excessive information and multitasking on social media overload the brain and decrease working memory (Sweller, 1988; Sweller et al., 2023). The Executive Functioning Theory explains cognitive flexibility as skills of inhibition, updating working memory, and task switching which depend on prefrontal brain systems that can be affected by stress (Miyake and Friedman, 2021; Diamond, 2022). The stress-buffering perspective further suggests that cognitive flexibility can function as a protective ability where flexible individuals are able to reframe challenges and mitigate the impact of social overload (Hobfoll et al., 2021; Kashdan and Rottenberg, 2022).

## **2. Review of Literature**

Supriyadi et al. (2025) performed a scoping review of digital fatigue and its impact on productivity and well-being. The review demonstrated that long-term digital engagement caused cognitive fatigue, stress and poor performance. Cognitive load affected decision-making and adaptation to tasks, while sustained digital load increased recovery time. The authors reported that

ever-present digital demands reduce executive control efficiency, making digital fatigue a major factor contributing to cognitive inflexibility in high-technology settings.

Gajewski et al. (2025) explored the effects of excessive digital screen exposure on visual health and the nervous system. Overuse of screens caused visual fatigue, headaches and neurological strain, which increased psychological pressure and mental exhaustion. Persistent discomfort disrupted emotional control and cognitive ability. The study observed that physical strain acts as an additional stressor, indirectly decreasing cognitive adaptability.

Bhowmik (2025) investigated the consequences of social media consumption and boredom in work settings. The research found that information overload increased emotional fatigue and mental stress, while monotonous scrolling reduced motivation and cognitive agility. Individuals struggled to initiate intentional and adaptive behavior. The author indicated that boredom-driven SNS use creates a feedback loop of overload, further impairing emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility over time.

Jain (2025) explored the impact of social media use on cognition among adults. Intrusive social media use was associated with attentional fragmentation, impaired memory and reduced cognitive flexibility. Respondents reported difficulty disengaging from online platforms, and divided attention interfered with deeper thinking. Heavy users also experienced higher mental fatigue, suggesting that prolonged SNS engagement may weaken adaptive thinking and executive regulation.

Mhapankar (2025) examined the influence of fast-paced screen media on executive functioning in undergraduates. The study found reduced inhibitory control and cognitive shifting ability when individuals were exposed to rapid digital content. Students struggled with slower goal-oriented tasks requiring sustained attention. Excessive stimulation encouraged habitual responses rather than reflective thinking, suggesting that exposure to fast-paced SNS content conditions the brain toward immediate rewards and reduces flexible adjustment in cognitively demanding situations.

Naik et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review on the impact of social media on cognitive development among children and young adults. The review found that excessive exposure affected attention regulation, memory consolidation and executive functioning. Continuous stimulation limited sustained attention and adaptive cognitive control, although moderate and structured use

had fewer negative effects. The authors highlighted that uncontrolled SNS use increases cognitive load and reduces opportunities for deep thinking, which may contribute to cognitive rigidity over time.

An et al. (2025) examined the effects of digital fatigue on academic resilience while considering the mediating role of cognitive flexibility. Digital fatigue negatively affected motivation, concentration and academic performance. However, students with higher cognitive flexibility adapted better to continuous digital demands. Their adaptability supported problem-solving, emotional regulation and persistence, suggesting that cognitive flexibility acts as a buffer against the academic consequences of digital stress.

Rudnik et al. (2025) investigated the relationships among stress, fatigue, and empathy, focusing on the mediating role of cognitive flexibility in university students. The study found that high stress and fatigue reduced empathic engagement and psychological well-being. Cognitive flexibility mediated these effects by supporting perspective-taking and emotional adjustment. The findings suggest that flexibility enables individuals to manage interpersonal and academic demands more adaptively in stressful environments.

Akram et al. (2025) examined the impact of digital detoxification on sleep quality and cognitive functioning. The researchers found that restricting digital exposure reduced perceived stress and cognitive overload. Participants showed improvement in attention span, working memory, and mental clarity. The findings suggest that short-term reductions in digital exposure may restore cognitive resources and support improvements in cognitive flexibility.

Goswami et al. (2025) assessed the impact of social media use on cognitive flexibility and sleep quality among young adults. The study found that excessive social media use disrupted sleep patterns and reduced cognitive flexibility. Poor sleep quality affected attention, short-term memory, and task-switching skills. The authors observed that late-night SNS use increased cognitive strain and reduced psychological recovery.

Zhan et al. (2025) studied the relationship between digital stress and problematic social media behavior among college students. The researchers found that digital stress led to maladaptive SNS use through emotional pathways such as negative affect and emotional exhaustion. Students experiencing high stress showed difficulty disengaging from maladaptive

usage patterns. Cognitive reappraisal provided buffering effects by supporting flexible emotional regulation.

Ayalon and Aharony (2025) examined the role of information overload in the relationship between information-seeking behavior and digital well-being. The study found that frequent information seeking increased cognitive load, leading to information overload and reduced digital well-being. Participants reported difficulty filtering and processing large amounts of information. The results indicate that information overload contributes to digital stress and may impair cognitive flexibility.

Çekiç et al. (2024) investigated the mediating role of cognitive flexibility between social media addiction and mental well-being among young adults. The results showed that higher levels of social media addiction were associated with poorer mental well-being, while cognitive flexibility partially mediated this relationship. Individuals with higher cognitive flexibility were better able to disengage from negative online content and regulate emotional responses. The study highlights cognitive flexibility as an important protective factor in the psychological outcomes of excessive SNS use.

Khetawat and Steele (2023) carried out a meta-analysis examining the relationship between elements of digital stress and psychological well-being. The results showed that higher levels of digital stress were associated with poorer psychological outcomes, including increased stress, anxiety, and reduced well-being. The meta-analysis was based on findings from multiple studies, providing strong quantitative support for the negative impact of digital stress. The findings further suggest that prolonged digital stress may indirectly influence cognitive flexibility through the effects of chronic psychological stress.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Problem**

To explore the relationship between SNS-related social overload, digital stress, and cognitive flexibility among young adults.

#### **3.2 Research Objectives**

- a) To assess the levels of Social Networking Sites- related Social Overload, Digital stress and Cognitive flexibility among young adults.

- b) To examine the relationship between SNS- related social overload and Digital stress among young adults.
- c) To examine the relationship between Digital stress and cognitive flexibility among young adults.
- d) To examine the relationship between SNS- related social overload and Cognitive Flexibility among young adults.

### 3.3 Hypothesis

**H1:** There will be a significant relationship between SNS- related social overload and Digital stress among young adults.

**H2:** There will be a significant relationship between Digital stress and Cognitive Flexibility among young adults.

**H3:** There will be a significant relationship between SNS- related Social Overload and Cognitive Flexibility among young adults.

### 3.4 Research Design

The study adopts a quantitative correlational research design. This design was considered appropriate as it allows the examination of relationships among SNS-related social overload, digital stress, and cognitive flexibility without any manipulation of variables.

### 3.5 Sample

- a) **Sample Size:** A total of 150 participants aged between 18-30 years will be recruited.
- b) **Sampling Method:** A purposive and snowball sampling method will be used.

### 3.6 Measures

#### 3.6.1 Social Networking Sites related Social Overload Scale (SOS):

The Social Networking Sites related Social Overload Scale (SOS), developed by Choi & Lim (2016), Measures perceived emotional and cognitive burden resulting from excessive social interaction demands on social networking services. Reported acceptable internal consistency across dimensions; scale grounded in social overload and cognitive overload frameworks. Construct validity supported through significant relationships with SNS addiction and psychological well-being.

#### 3.6.2 Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI):

The Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI), developed by Dennis & Vander Wal (2010), Assesses the ability to adapt thinking and behavior in response to changing situations; includes Alternatives and Control subscales. High test–retest reliability ( $r = .81$  total); strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$  total; Alternatives  $\alpha = .91$ ; Control  $\alpha = .86$ ). Good convergent validity demonstrated through associations with cognitive flexibility, coping, depression, and anxiety measures.

### **3.6.3 Digital Stress Scale (DSS):**

The Digital Stress Scale (DSS), developed by Hall et al. (2021), Measures psychological stress arising from excessive digital technology use across five dimensions of digital stress. Excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .85$  total; subscales range from  $\alpha = .86$  to  $.93$ ). Strong construct, convergent, and factorial validity supported by confirmatory factor analysis and associations with psychological distress.

### **3.7 Procedure**

The purpose of the study was explained to the participants who were then given voluntary consent to participate. The three questionnaires; the SNS-Related Social Overload Scale, Cognitive Flexibility Scale and Digital Stress Scale, were then conducted through the internet or offline depending on their convenience. The respondents were requested to answer the questions truthfully because they were guaranteed of confidentiality and time constraints were not stipulated. When this was over, all answers were gathered, and it was ready to analyze them to provide statistical outcomes.

## **4. Result**

The current Research investigated the connections between Social Networking Site related Social Overload, Digital Stress and Cognitive Flexibility among Young Adults. The correlation analysis provided by Pearson was aimed at testing the hypotheses.

**Table 1.** *Descriptive Statistics for Social Networking Sites related Social Overload, Digital Stress and Cognitive Flexibility*

|               | N   | Missing | Mean | Median | SD    | Minimum | Maximum |
|---------------|-----|---------|------|--------|-------|---------|---------|
| <b>Gender</b> | 150 | 1       | 1.38 | 1.00   | 0.487 | 1       | 2       |

|                                                 |             | Cognitive Flexibility | Digital Stress | Social Networking Sites related Social Overload |        |    |     |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------|----|-----|
| Cognitive Flexibility                           | Pearson's r | —                     |                |                                                 |        |    |     |
|                                                 | df          | —                     |                |                                                 |        |    |     |
|                                                 | p-value     | —                     |                |                                                 |        |    |     |
|                                                 | N           | —                     |                |                                                 |        |    |     |
| Digital Stress                                  | Pearson's r | -0.094                | —              |                                                 |        |    |     |
|                                                 | df          | 148                   | —              |                                                 |        |    |     |
|                                                 | p-value     | .251                  | —              |                                                 |        |    |     |
|                                                 | N           | 150                   | —              |                                                 |        |    |     |
| Social Networking Sites related Social Overload | Pearson's r | -0.210*               | 0.544***       | —                                               |        |    |     |
|                                                 | df          | 148                   | 148            | —                                               |        |    |     |
|                                                 | p-value     | .010                  | <.001          | —                                               |        |    |     |
|                                                 | N           | 150                   | 150            | —                                               |        |    |     |
| Social Overload                                 | 150         | 1                     | 17.99          | 17.00                                           | 8.889  | 6  | 42  |
| Cognitive Flexibility                           | 150         | 1                     | 94.04          | 94.00                                           | 15.557 | 59 | 140 |
| Digital Stress                                  | 150         | 1                     | 68.81          | 71.00                                           | 22.465 | 24 | 120 |

The study involved one hundred and fifty participants as illustrated in the table 1. In gender, mean was 1.38 (SD = 0.487), median 1 and the lowest and highest scores were 1 and 2 respectively and there was a slight high representation of one gender. In the case of Social Networking Sites related social overload (SOS Total) which included a mean of 17.99 (SD = 8.889), the median of 17, and the lowest score of 6 and the highest score of 42. The mean of cognitive flexibility (CFI Total) was 94.04 (SD = 15.557), and the median of the scores was 94 but the range of the scores was between 59 and 140. Lastly, the digital stress (DSS Total) mean was 68.81 (SD = 22.465), median was 71, and the lowest score of 24 and the highest score of 120.

**Table 2:** *Correlation between study variables*

As observed in the table 4.3 analysis investigated the correlation of cognitive flexibility (CFI), digital stress (DSS), and SNS-related social overload (SOS) in young adults. Digital stress had a small negative association with cognitive flexibility ( $r = -0.094$ ) and this was non-statistically significant ( $p = .251$ ). This means that an increase in digital stress can have a slight negative influence on cognitive flexibility but the impact is not significant in this sample. Cognitive flexibility and social overload were found to have a significant negative correlation ( $r = -0.210$ ,  $p = .010$ ), which indicates that the higher an individual social overload, the lower the cognitive flexibility.

Digital stress and the social overload had a significant and positive correlation ( $r = 0.544$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the respondents experiencing higher social pressure of SNS reported more digital stress. These findings overall indicate social overload has a greater impact on digital stress and reduced cognitive flexibility, but the influence of digital stress on cognitive flexibility is not so great in this sample.

## 5. Discussion

The current research investigated the interconnection between SNS-related social overload, digital stress, and cognitive flexibility among young adults. The descriptive findings showed that SNS-related social overload and digital stress were moderate among participants, while cognitive flexibility scores were widely distributed, indicating both adaptive and less adaptive coping styles. Correlation analysis revealed significant associations among the variables. SNS-related social overload was positively related to digital stress, suggesting that individuals experiencing higher social demands online are more likely to report stress. Digital stress showed a negative, though not significant, association with cognitive flexibility, indicating that higher stress may reduce individuals' ability to adapt their thinking and problem-solving strategies. Social overload was also directly related to cognitive flexibility, supporting the idea that excessive social demands may negatively influence adaptive cognitive functioning.

These findings are consistent with existing literature. Earlier studies by Choi and Lim (2016) and Maier et al. (2016) suggested that social and technological overload may influence psychological outcomes indirectly through mechanisms such as fatigue and SNS addiction. Similarly, Reinecke et al. (2017) and Wilmer et al. (2017) reported that excessive digital

engagement contributes to stress and cognitive strain, which can affect attention, memory, and cognitive flexibility. The results can be explained through the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which proposes that perceived overload triggers stress when social demands exceed coping resources. In addition, Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) suggests that continuous social and informational demands place extraneous load on working memory, thereby reducing cognitive flexibility. Supporting studies by Fu et al. (2020) and Alexopoulou et al. (2020) also demonstrate that social and information overload can deplete cognitive resources and reduce adaptive thinking.

Further research indicates that individuals with higher cognitive flexibility are better able to cope with digital stress and maintain adaptive functioning under demanding digital environments (Braem & Egner, 2018; Kalia & Knauff, 2020; Fatima et al., 2025). Interventions such as mindfulness and resilience-based strategies have also been shown to reduce the negative effects of SNS-related stress and enhance adaptive coping (Yuvasri & Malavia, 2025; Zayed, 2024). In contemporary digital environments characterized by constant connectivity, short-form content, and AI-mediated communication, social media can contribute to digital fatigue and cognitive overload (Chirayath et al., 2025; Arouch et al., 2025). The findings highlight the importance of promoting digital resilience, adaptive coping, and balanced technology use to support cognitive functioning among young adults. Overall, the study emphasizes the interconnected roles of SNS-related social overload, digital stress, and cognitive flexibility, and suggests that future research should explore these relationships using longitudinal designs, diverse samples, and intervention-based approaches.

## 6. Conclusion

The current research examined the correlation between SNS-related social overload, digital stress, and cognitive flexibility among young adults. The findings indicate that increasing psychological load is generated by social overload within digital environments. SNS-related social overload was significantly associated with digital stress, suggesting that constant online social demands, notifications, and interaction pressure contribute to higher levels of stress among young adults. The study also found a significant negative relationship between SNS-related social overload and cognitive flexibility, indicating that excessive social pressures on social networking

sites may reduce individuals' ability to adapt their thinking, shift perspectives, and respond flexibly to changing situations.

Although digital stress showed a negative association with cognitive flexibility, the relationship was not statistically significant, suggesting that stress alone may not strongly influence cognitive flexibility unless accompanied by prolonged social overload. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of understanding how constant engagement with social networking sites can affect not only emotional well-being but also essential cognitive abilities required for adaptation and problem solving. The study suggests that cognitive flexibility may be negatively influenced by excessive social overload on social networking sites and emphasizes the need to promote healthier social media usage patterns among young adults to support digital well-being.

### **6.1 Limitation and Future Implications**

The present study has several limitations that should be considered while interpreting the findings. The research relied entirely on self-report measures to assess SNS-related social overload, digital stress, and cognitive flexibility, which may be influenced by response biases such as social desirability and inaccurate self-perceptions. In addition, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships among the variables, as the data were collected at a single point in time. The use of non-probability sampling and a sample primarily consisting of young adults may also restrict the generalizability of the findings to other age groups, occupational contexts, and sociocultural settings. Furthermore, cognitive flexibility and responses to digital stress may vary across developmental stages and cultural environments. The study also focused on a limited set of variables, while other relevant factors such as emotion regulation, personality traits, fear of missing out, coping strategies, and digital resilience were not examined. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal designs to better understand causal relationships, include additional mediating and moderating variables, and expand sample diversity across different demographic and cultural groups. Additionally, mixed-method approaches incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, or daily diaries may provide deeper insights into how individuals experience social networking demands, digital stress, and cognitive functioning in real-world digital environments.

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