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The Perceptions of Social Media Usage and Their Correlates among the University Student Population

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ABSTRACT

The widespread use of social media (SM), especially by college students, in a developing country like Nepal, has resulted in various negative and, to some extent, positive side effects. The aim of this study is guided by the idea that people behave based on their perception of reality, not based on reality itself. An in-depth understanding of the perception of SM usage and its correlates is, therefore, of vital importance for better use of it in the days to come. A descriptive quantitative research design was followed, where 163 student samples were collected through a field survey for the study. Perceptions on five different dimensions of SM use and their correlates are analysed. The findings show that the majority of students agree that SM helps enhance social connectedness and information sharing aspects, while a significant proportion perceives negative reactions to SM use by family members and negative impacts of SM use. Students' perceptions of SM use are not significantly different between males and females. Mother's education is significantly positively correlated with the perception of negative health effects. The negative family reaction toward the use of SM is highest among teens, suggesting that parents are more concerned about the excessive use of SM by their kids. Science and management student groups regard highly of importance of SM in socializing. These findings suggest that parents can play an important role in reducing the SM time, preventing negative consequences. Socialisation and sharing of information dimensions can be important contributions of SM toward a better lifestyle in the current digital era.

Keywords: Correlates, Health Impact**,** Perception, Social Media Usage, Social Connectedness

INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of social media (SM), especially by college students, in a developing country like Nepal, has resulted in both negative and, to some extent, positive side effects (Subedi & Upadhyay, 2024; Peter, 2015; Mahevish et al., 2023). On the negative side, SM addiction has caused poor health conditions, thereby lowering academic performance (Peter, 2015; Mahevish et al., 2023; WHO, 2017; Rithika & Selvaraj, 2013). While excessive use of SM manifests into addictive behaviour, better use of it might improve students' academic performance, online socialising (connectedness), and social intelligence (Laburi, Navulla, & Yamini, 2019; Bajpai & Maneesha, 2018). Social media can be defined as all the applications on the World Wide Web (WWW) that enable users to interact with each other through the creation and sharing of digital content, text, and calls (Duradoni et. al., 2020). More than four billion people use different SM platforms globally, who engage on average for more than two hours per day on those sites. A recent study has shown that the most popular SM platforms are Facebook with 2.74 billion users, YouTube with 2.29 billion users, and WhatsApp with 2 billion users, which have changed the landscape of communication and established relationships among people in a big way (Kemp, 2021). A recent study by Subedi & Upadhyay (2024), while analysing the perceived health impacts of SM usage among college students, has highlighted a need for further investigation on the SM perceptions and their determinants. In this context, an in-depth understanding of the perception of SM usage and its correlates is of vital importance for better use of it in the days to come. This study is an attempt in this direction.

Perception can broadly be defined as the organisation, identification, and interpretation of sensory information to represent and understand the environment and phenomena (Reitz, 1987). Individuals receive through sense organs a variety of stimuli from the environment, and they process these stimuli and interpret them repeatedly. This was a perception of the given phenomena that was formed in our minds. This, in turn, largely determines an individual's behaviour and actions. People behave based on their perception of reality, not based on the reality itself (Ajzen, 1985; Reitz, 1987). We find a clear link between perception and behaviour in SM usage as illustrated by a study by Andreassen et al. (2016), who developed a SM addiction scale, popularly known as Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale. Their study was designed to measure the SM addiction using various psychometric scales for different items. Too much time spent on SM platforms could result in addictive behaviours and consequently have a severe disruption of daily life activities. Various qualitative studies have identified different dimensions of perception of SM as an effective tool to communicate with friends and family, connect with peers and increase social capital- an indication of connectedness dimension (Hayes et al., 2021; Davis, 2012). The other study points to the perception of SM in facilitating emotional regulation as well (Throuvala et al., 2019). The SM posts of images are often curated, giving a false perception of reality that can lead to negative self-comparisons and distorted body image (Fardouly et al., 2015).

The way people use SM is influenced by their own perceptions of it as well as by their social environment. Parents, teachers and the creation of awareness for proper use of SM can impact students' SM usage patterns and protect them from potential negative side effects (Subedi & Upadhyay, 2024; Hammer et al., 2021; Stevic & Matthes, 2021). While healthy use of SM platforms keeps students updated with the latest events and socialising, it is equally important to protect students from such problems as cyberbullying, "Facebook depression," sexting, and exposure to inappropriate content (Salma & Bhuiyan, 2025).

The ubiquitous presence and application of information and communication technologies have compelled human beings to relate to far more people and institutions than ever before, which demands a different conception of ourselves. The ultimate result of this phenomenon is that each of us is not oneself but many, moving humanity towards simulated lifestyles (Gergen, 1991). Moreover, the FoMO (fear of missing out) concern has become prevalent among young college students when they remain out of touch with SMs (Akbari et al., 2021). The first step in managing SM usage is to understand how the users perceive the entire gamut of SM phenomena in the present digital era. Based on our review, we could not find a detailed quantitative study focusing on different dimensions of SM perception and their correlates, especially among college students in Nepal. This study is, therefore, an attempt to analyse the perceptions of SM usage and their correlates among the college students of Pokhara valley. The specific objectives of the study are to identify the correlation between perception dimensions and other related variables and to compare the means of perception scores by different student groups. The findings of the study help understand how the SM users perceive different dimensions of SM and how different variables are related to the perceptions, which can facilitate better use of SM platforms by college students in the days to come.

DATA AND METHODS
Description of study area
The study sample has been drawn from the campus-level students in Pokhara Valley. We select the two largest campuses, namely, Prithvi Narayan Campus (PNC) and Pashchimanchal Campus (PC) in the valley for this purpose. PNC is a public co-education institution and is one of the largest campuses affiliated with the Tribhuvan University, Nepal. Current students on the campus come from the Pokhara valley as well as from surrounding areas of Kaski, Baglung, Mustang, Myagdi, Manang, Tanhun, Palpa, Syangja, Lamjung, Gorkha districts and mostly from the western region of Nepal. Five different faculties are identified: Science, Law, Humanities, Education and Management. PN campus has more than 12800 students in various academic programs, and PC has about 1500 students distributed among five different engineering disciplines.

The study follows a descriptive and analytical research technique with cross cross-sectional descriptive research design. With quantitative design, we can analyse the survey data following both descriptive and prescriptive/inferential methods, which would enrich the analysis to a greater extent.

Determination of sample size
The sample size has been calculated using the following formula:

$n = PQ\left(\dfrac{Z\alpha}{d}\right)^2$ (Kothari, 2004), then adding 5% for anticipated subjects who would

refuse to participate in the study after being randomly selected and for the null and void questionnaires.
Here,

    n = required sample size
    P = share of population impacted by SM
    Q = 1 - P
    d = Margin of error
    P = 0.5

Q = 0.5

d = ±0.08, commonly used value for d is between 0.01 and 0.1 (Kothari, 2004)

Therefore,

$$n = 0.5 \times 0.5 \left(\frac{1.96}{0.08}\right)^2$$

$$n = 150.03. \cong 150 \pm 10\%$$

In this study, purposive and convenience sampling techniques have been employed for sample selection for the field survey. In the first stage, we purposively select PNC and PC, the two biggest campuses in Pokhara. The sample drawn from these two major campuses would sufficiently represent the total student population of Pokhara valley, we believe. In the second stage, students have been divided into three student groups based on similarities in study programs. We have grouped the entire population into three student groups based on study programs, namely, Management, Science and Technology and Humanities. In the third stage, the samples have been selected proportionately based on the total number of students in each group (see Table 1). The actual student sample was selected based on convenience.

Data was collected by using a structured and pre-tested self-administered questionnaire, which was developed by adopting the methodologies described in previous similar studies. The questionnaires were prepared in English, and while collecting the responses, they were asked in Nepali to make the questions understandable to the respondents. Regarding the data collection process, there were five data collectors/enumerators and one supervisor. Graduate students were recruited and trained for this purpose. The training focused on informing the study objectives and the importance of keeping confidentiality and privacy while conducting a field survey. The enumerators contacted the sampled students in person and collected the data on paper.

Data were checked for completeness, coded, and entered into the computer by using SPSS version 26 for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, P-value <0.1, ANOVA and t-test were used for analyses and testing the statistical significance. With ANOVA and t-test, we strived to confirm the statistical significance of relations for independent sample means for more than two groups and two groups, respectively. The Tukey HSD (Honestly Significant Difference) test, as a post-hoc statistical test, was used to compare all possible pairs of means in a one-way ANOVA when the overall F-test was found significant. We also used correlation analysis and associated tests to check for the significant relationships among the perception scores and their correlates.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, we present the descriptive statistics, followed by correlation results and the means comparisons at the end of this section. Table 1 provides the distribution of samples among gender, student groups based on their faculties and students' permanent residence address. The male student sample is about 10% more than the female sample, and the sample from management faculty is the highest, as the proportion of management students is higher at PNC. Also, there is a clear dominance of the student sample from within Pokhara compared to outside Pokhara, 84.7% vs 15.3%. These categorical variables are used as explanatory variables for the t-test and ANOVA tests. We have divided the student samples into three broad categories based on their enrolled academic departments to test whether the perception dimensions vary by student groups. This categorisation is used by Subedi & Upadhyay (2024) and has some policy implications.

Table 1
Sample Distribution of Students (n=163)

| Variables→ | Gender | | Student groups | | | Permanent Residence of Students | |
	Female	Male	Management	Humanities	Science and Technology	Inside Pokhara	Outside Pokhara
Frequency	73	90	70	33	60	138	25
Percentage	44.80	55.2	42.90	20.20	36.80	84.70	15.30

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of five dimensions of SM use perceptions and other related variables. Looking at the mean values, the most positive perception is on the role of SM in sharing and collaborating (4.28 out of 5), followed by increased social connectedness (4.06), which later reflects on the positive side effects of SM use in action. On negative family reaction and negative health impacts, the mean scores are above 3, showing that the students perceive these as real concerns. We just considered the usage time of Facebook and YouTube SMs for correlation analysis, as these two SMs take more than 50% of the overall SM usage time.

Table 2
*Descriptive Statistics of Perception Scores and Other Related Variables (n=163)*

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
SM helps in sharing and collaborating with peers and teachers.	4.28	0.61
SM helps in increasing self-esteem and well-being.	3.50	0.86
SM helps increase social connectedness.	4.06	0.76
There is a negative family reaction toward SM use.	3.04	0.94
SM usage impacts mental and physical health negatively.	3.29	0.92
Number of hours spent on Facebook	2.04	1.17
Number of hours spent on YouTube	2.44	1.06
Father's education level	11.74	4.49
Mother's education level	9.72	4.19
Family Income	73.95	60.17
Age of the student	21.52	3.64

Figure 1 summarises the six perception items/variables, which are measured on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1= fully disagree to 5= fully agree. One can observe that perception regarding SM as a means of sharing (educational materials) and collaborating with peers and teachers is highly agreeable among the students. Out of the total sample, 36.8% fully agree on the proposition that SM helps in sharing information. The majority of respondents agree on this proposition, and there were no students to disagreed. This is a good indicator that students in general have a positive well of the SM as a means to share digital contents among peers and teachers via SM platforms, which is in line with their actions in terms of relatively higher hours of SM usage (about 4 hours per day on Facebook and YouTube) as found in our previous studies (Subedi & Upadhyay). Other studies on SM use also pointed out a significant amount of use of SM for this purpose (Peter, 2015; Mahevish et al., 2023; Laburi, Navulla, & Yamini, 2019; Bajpai & Maneesha, 2018).

On the second item of perception, the majority still agree on the proposition that SM increase self-esteem and well-being, yet lesser degree than sharing and collaboration. About 35% of respondents are in the neutral zone, and 11% disagree on this item. So, we can conclude that there is a good split between the two opposing camps regarding the

enhancement of self-esteem and well-being. On SM's role in increasing socialising and connectedness. This shows that widely cited FOMO effect (Akbari et al., 2021) of SM usage on the student population is prevalent to some extent, which might cause anxiety and lower self-esteem.

Figure 1
Distribution of Perception Scores for Different Items
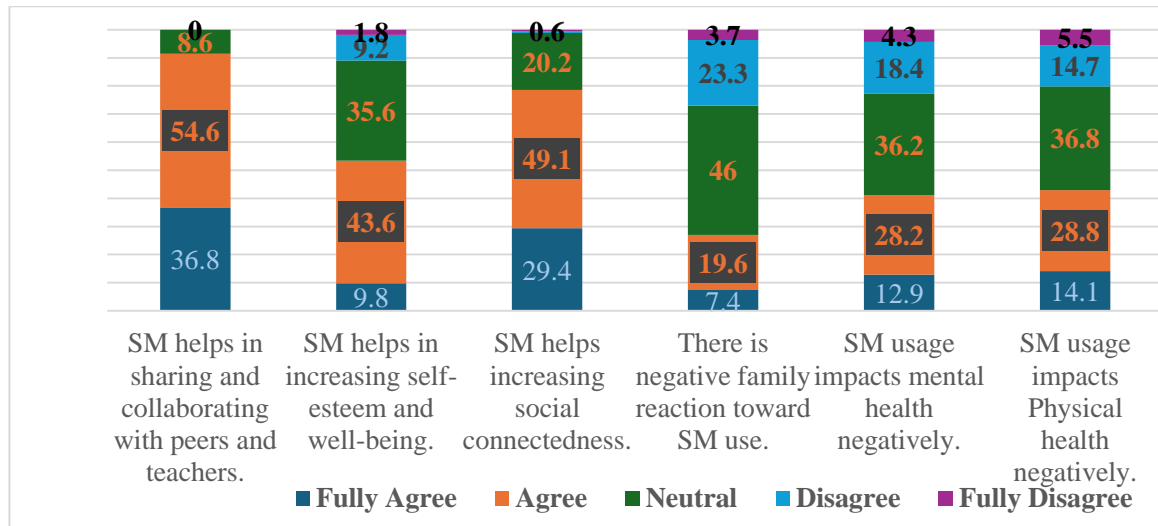
About 80% of the sample agree on the proposition that SM increases social connectedness (see the third bar in Fig. 1), which is in line with the findings of the past studies, where there is general agreement on such positive side effect as enhanced socializing (connectedness dimension) of proper use of SM (e.g., Laburi, Navulla, & Yamini, 2019; Bajpai & Maneesha, 2018). About 21% have neutral or disagree ratings on this dimension of SM perception. The fourth dimension of perception regarding the reaction of family members, especially parents, toward the use of SM by students shows that most of the responses at the neutral zone (about 46%). About 27% of the sample agrees that their parents are concerned about their SM usage pattern, showing a negative reaction to the SM use. If we combine both neutral and agreeable scores, this dimension is of significant value, meaning that parents are more concerned about the excessive use of SM by their kids. This is an important finding, suggesting that parents can play an important role in reducing the SM time, which was found significantly higher in our previous study (Subedi & Upadhyay, 2024).

On the perception regarding negative impacts of SM use on mental and physical health (the last two bars in Fig. 1), the percentages of samples that agree on the propositions are found to be similar (about 40%). And if combined with the neutral respondents (about 36%), the total becomes a significant proportion of the students who perceive that SM use impacts negatively on health, sounding an alarm for the negative health consequences of excessive SM use.

Table 3

Correlations among perception scores and their correlates (n=163)*

Variables (1=Fully Disagree… 5=Fully Agree)	Facebook Time	YouTube Time	Father's Education	Mother's Education	Family Income	Age
SM helps in sharing and collaborating with peers and teachers	-0.06 **0.45**	0.01 **0.94**	0.07 **0.36**	0.01 **0.90**	-0.13 **0.11**	-0.04 **0.58**
SM helps in increasing self-esteem and well-being	0.05 **0.51**	-0.10 **0.22**	-0.04 **0.64**	0.09 **0.27**	0.08 **0.33**	0.05 **0.51**
SM helps increase social connectedness	-0.02 **0.83**	0.01 **0.88**	0.12 **0.13**	0.02 **0.83**	-0.23 **0.01**	0.06 **0.45**
There is a negative family reaction toward SM use	-.092 **0.24**	-.004 **0.96**	.110 **0.16**	.058 **0.46**	-0.10 **0.18**	-0.23 **0.01**
Aggregate perception of negative health impacts due to SM	0.08 **0.83**	-0.07 **0.37**	0.07 **0.36**	0.13 **0.09**	-0.14 **0.08**	0.08 **0.30**

*Figures in bold are p-values for the association

Table 3 reveals the results of the correlation and their statistical significance between five perception dimensions and their correlates. Here, we have taken the average scores from mental and physical health impacts and call this as aggregate perception of negative health impacts due to SM without loss of generality. By correlation analysis, we want to establish the relationships between the perception dimensions and their correlates, along with the significance test. It is found that the perception of social connectedness is negatively related to family income, significantly at 5% level of significance, although the correlation coefficient (r=-0.23) is not so high. This suggests that students from high-income families perceive SM's role as socialising less on average. Also, there is a significant negative association (r=-0.23) between negative family reaction and the age of the students, suggesting that the higher the age, the lower the perception of parents' concern over the use of SM. This result seems plausible as the students grow; the parents would not be much concerned with their children's SM use patterns on average. There are two variables, namely mother's education and family income, which are significantly related to the perception of aggregate negative health impact. The positive coefficient (r=0.13) for mother's education indicates that a more educated mother would influence the perception of health impacts of students positively, meaning that they perceive well about the negative health impacts better. On the other hand, a negative coefficient (r=-0.14) for family income suggests that students from higher-income families would perceive less in terms of negative health impacts.

Table 4

Mean Comparisons for Perceptions by Gender

Gender		SM helps in sharing and collaborating with peers and teachers	SM helps in increasing self-esteem and well-being	SM helps increase social connectedness	There is a negative family reaction toward SM use	SM usage impacts mental and physical health negatively
Male	Mean	4.23	3.48	4.01	3.11	3.18
	Std. Deviation	0.68	0.93	0.87	1.11	1.02
Female	Mean	4.32	3.52	4.10	2.98	3.38
	Std. Deviation	0.56	0.81	0.65	0.76	0.82
P-Value		**0.36**	**0.75**	**0.47**	**0.37**	**0.16**

Table 4 presents the results of the t-test for comparing the mean perception scores by gender. No mean perception dimensions are significantly different between male and

female students, suggesting that gender does not explain the variation in perceptions. Both the male and female students perceive the fallouts of SM use similarly.

For testing whether the perceptions are different based on students' age group, we have divided the samples into three categories, namely teens who are below 20 years, early 20s who are between 20 and 25 years, and above 25. The distribution of students based on this categorisation is 31.9%, 58.9% and 9.2% for teens, early 20s and above 25, respectively. The one-way ANOVA test (cf. Table 5) shows that the mean perception scores on SM's role as increasing self-esteem and well-being are significantly different among the age groups at a 10% level. The above 25 student group take this role of SM with higher regard as their mean is the highest (3.72), and the early 20s show the lowest mean score on this perception dimension. Another significant difference in mean perception score at 5% level is found to be with the negative family reactions on use of SM, where the teens group has the highest mean score (3.23) and the lowest is with the above 25 group. This suggests that family shows more concern with the negative effects of using SM for teens and less concern with the older students. This has important policy implications in terms of parents' role in curbing the excessive use of SMs and preventing the youth from the negative effects of SM usage, especially for teens.

Table 5

Mean Comparisons for Perceptions by Age Group

Descriptions		Mean	Std. Deviation	P-Value
SM helps in sharing and collaborating with peers and teachers	Teens	4.29	0.57	
	Early 20s	4.26	0.66	0.71
	Above 25	4.39	0.50	
SM helps in increasing self-esteem and well-being	Teens	3.65	0.81	
	Early 20s	3.38	0.89	**0.09**
	Above 25	3.72	0.75	
SM helps increase social connectedness	Teens	4.08	0.71	
	Early 20s	4.03	0.78	0.78
	Above 25	4.17	0.79	
There is a negative family reaction toward SM use	Teens	3.23	0.76	
	Early 20s	3.03	0.98	**0.02**
	Above 25	2.50	0.99	
SM usage impacts mental and physical health negatively	Teens	3.1442	0.97	
	Early 20s	3.3763	0.88	0.34
	Above 25	3.2778	0.91	

Table 6 summarises the one-way ANOVA tests for means comparison for perceptions by different student groups. The tests suggest that there are significant differences in perceptions regarding SM use and increased social connectedness and negative family reactions among the students from three different study programs. Students from science and technology programs perceive the highest (4.13), and the lowest mean is from the management group in terms of SM helping increase social connectedness. This indicates students from science and technology are more likely to use SM for socialising, as the perception leads to a change in behaviour and finally to action (Ajzen, 1985).

Table 6
Means comparison for Perceptions by Student Group

Descriptions		Mean	Std. Deviation	P-Value
SM helps in sharing and collaborating with peers and teachers	Management	4.29	0.59	
	Science & Technology	4.27	0.66	0.96
	Humanities	4.30	0.58	
SM helps in increasing self-esteem and well-being	Management	3.37	0.80	
	Science & Technology	3.57	0.89	0.21
	Humanities	3.67	0.92	
SM helps increase social connectedness	Management	3.90	0.66	
	Science & Technology	4.13	0.89	**0.04**
	Humanities	4.27	0.63	
There is a negative family reaction toward SM use	Management	2.90	0.87	
	Science & Technology	3.27	0.95	**0.05**
	Humanities	2.91	0.98	
SM usage impacts mental and physical health negatively	Management	3.2071	0.83	
	Science & Technology	3.3083	0.99	0.48
	Humanities	3.4394	0.95	

Similarly, on negative family reaction, students from science and technology scored highest and management the lowest (3.27 vs 2.90), suggesting families of students from science and technology are more concerned with the SM usage by their kids. This is important, as past studies have suggested important roles of family members to prevent youth from improper use of SMs (e.g., Hammer et al., 2021; Stevic and Matthes, 2021. In order to further investigate the significant differences pairwise, we run the Tukey HSD test, which is a post-hoc statistical test used to compare all possible pairs of means when the overall F-test is significant. Table 7 presents the Tukey test's results, showing that the management group's mean is significantly different from the humanities and other group pairs' means are different at 5% level of significance on the social connectedness dimension. Similarly, on negative family reaction toward SM usage, the mean of the science and technology group is significantly different from that of the management group at a 10% level of significance. We can conclude that the means of science and technology and management are not significantly different in the social connectedness dimension, though the science and technology group has the highest mean. This suggests that both groups perceive of important role of SM use in enhancing socialising equally. These results give the refinement from the one-way ANOVA results on mean comparisons.

Table 7
Tukey HSD Test Results

Dependent Variables	(I) Student Group	(J) Student Group	P-Value
SM helps increase social connectedness	Management	Science & Technology	0.18
		Humanities	**0.05**
	Science & Technology	Management	0.18
		Humanities	0.67
	Humanities	Management	**0.05**
		Science & Technology	0.67
There is a negative family reaction toward SM use	Management	Science & Technology	**0.07**
		Humanities	0.99
	Science & Technology	Management	**0.07**
		Humanities	0.18
	Humanities	Management	0.99
		Science & Technology	0.18

CONCLUSION

The widespread use of SM, especially by college students in a developing country like Nepal, has resulted in a condition of living as a simulated life with associated negative and, to some extent, positive side effects. The aim of this study is guided by the idea that people behave based on their perception of reality, not based on reality itself. The issue of saturated self with simulated lifestyle and FoMO concern, especially for youth are pertinent issue at present to be analysed. Descriptive quantitative research was followed, where 163 student samples were collected by a field survey for the study. We analyse the students' perceptions of five dimensions of SM usage and identify some of the important correlates of these dimensions. The dimensions considered for this study are: SM helps in sharing and collaborating with peers and teachers; SM helps in increasing self-esteem and well-being; SM helps in increasing social connectedness; there is a negative family reaction toward SM use; and SM usage impacts mental and physical health negatively.

The majority of students agree on SM's roles as enhancing socialising and sharing information among peers and teachers, while there is significant concern regarding negative family reaction toward and the health impacts of SM usage. The perceptions on all five dimensions of SM are not significantly different by gender. This suggests that both male and female students perceive SM usage equally. The one-way ANOVA test shows that the mean perception scores on SM's role in increasing self-esteem and well-being are significantly different among the age groups at a 10% level. The above 25 student group takes the role of SM with higher regard, as their mean is the highest, and the early 20s show the lowest mean score on this perception dimension. Another significant difference in mean perception score at 5% level is found to be with the negative family reactions on use of SM, where the teens group has the highest mean score, and the lowest is with the above 25 group. This suggests that family shows more concern with the negative effects of using SM for teens and less concern with the older students. This has important policy implications in terms of parents' role in curbing the excessive use of SMs and preventing the youth from the negative effects of SM usage.

Students from science and technology programs perceive that the highest and the lowest mean is from the management group in terms of SM helping increase social connectedness. This indicates students from science and technology are more likely to use SM for socialising, as the perception leads to a change in behaviour and finally to action. Further diagnosis with the Tukey test suggests that the means of science and technology and management are not significantly different in the social connectedness dimension, though the science and technology group have the highest mean. This suggests that both groups perceive of important role of SM use in enhancing socialising equally. Similarly, on negative family reaction toward SM usage, the mean of the science and technology group is significantly different from that of the management group. Overall, the findings of this study suggest perceptions of SM use can lead to both positive and negative outcomes when the perceptions manifest into action. Higher mothers' education and parents' concern with negative reactions to SM use for different groups can help curb the excessive use of SM and prevent negative consequences. Other equally important findings are regarding high perception scores relating to SM's role in increasing social connectedness and information sharing among peers and teachers, suggesting the significance of the contribution of SM toward a better lifestyle in the current digital era.

DECLARATIONS

Data availability statement
The data used in this study were collected through direct field visits. The datasets are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethical approval
Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from the relevant authorities and all participants.

Competing interests
The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

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Declaration on AI use
The authors confirm that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the design, data collection, analysis, or preparation of this manuscript.

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