



Social Media Use, Religious Distraction, and Secularization among University Students: Evidence from Public Universities in Multan, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of religious distraction of social media and individual level secularization among the university students of two public universities of Multan, Pakistan. The research design used was quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive-correlational. The researcher developed questionnaire was used to collect data from 255 students measuring the demographic characteristics, religious distraction and secularization. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used for analysis. The results revealed that on the whole, students felt that social media negatively impacted their concentration during religious practices, negatively disrupted their Namaz, Juma'ah, zikr and majlis, and negatively affected their participation in religious activities. They also associated social media with secular, materialistic and worldly values. Individual-level secularization was positively and significantly associated with religious distraction, but the relationship was weak. There were significant differences in religious distraction between the gender and age groups, and secularization did not differ significantly between the gender and age or study programme groups. The study emphasizes the importance of responsible social media usage and the need for digital-religious literacy

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1. Introduction

With the fast growth of digital connectivity, social media has become a part and parcel of university students' daily lives in Pakistan. The increase in broadband access and data usage suggests a growing reliance on digital platforms for education, communication, entertainment, and seeking information (PTA, 2024). The platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X have thus become significant platforms where students are exposed to social, cultural, political, and religious concepts. Social media are not just a medium for information transmission, but are also a medium that influences the production, selection, dissemination and interpretation of knowledge. Religious teachings, which used to be acquired primarily from families, mosques, teachers and

formally trained scholars, are now also found in short videos, influencers, discussion groups, live streams and algorithmically recommended content. This change has been theorized by the idea of the mediatization of religion, which proposes that the media have a growing impact on the representation, understanding and practice of religion (Hjarvard, 2011). Cheong (2017) also suggests that digital communication has the capacity to transform religious communities, religious meanings and authority. Campbell (2012) notion of networked religion also emphasizes personalized identities, changing power dynamics, networked communities and the integration of online and offline religious activity. Campbell and Evolvi (2020) thus stress that the impact of digital technology is not monolithic but is shaped by engagement with cultural and religious traditions, as well as beliefs. This change is important in today's higher education. Social media can be used to facilitate religious participation by providing greater access to religious texts, lectures, discussions, and religious groups. These platforms enable youth to pose questions, engage with others who share their views, and make their religious identity visible.

Trysnes and Synnes (2022) identified that social media provided a platform for young Muslims and Christians to share religious ideas and engage in religious self-presentation, whereas Siuda (2021) noticed that today's religious involvement is more likely to be a blend of information sharing, interaction and community engagement both online and offline. Digital technologies can offer instant and adaptable access to religious knowledge for students who are unable to attend formal religious education on a regular basis. But the information may not always be of high quality or be trustworthy. Solahudin and Fakhruroji (2019) concluded that social media promoted Islamic learning while at the same time promoting religious populism and conflicting interpretations. Zaid et al. (2022) also found that Muslim influencers tend to convey religious messages in a personal story, visual content, and lifestyle. While these methods might help ideas spread to younger audiences, popularity and algorithmic exposure do not necessarily equal academic credibility. According to Andok (2024), visibility, communication skills and audience engagement are more and more determining perceptions of religious authority. This can make it challenging for students to discern between legitimate religious scholarship and opinion, commercialized material, or material that is intended to garner attention in quickly evolving digital religious environments. The impact of social media on religious life is not just with the messages that are received, but also with the design of digital platforms. Frequent scrolling, checking, switching between content, and reacting to notifications can cause attention to be divided and can interfere with activities that demand concentration and self-regulation. Stothart, Mitchum and Yehnert (2015) showed that even when users didn't interact with their smartphone notifications, they still affected attention, and Ward et al. (2017) showed that the mere presence of a smartphone could be enough to decrease available capacity. Wilmer, Sherman and Chein (2017) and Liebherr et al. (2020) also indicate that excessive use of smartphones and media multitasking can impact attention, working memory, and inhibitory control. Upshaw et al. (2022) also discovered that notification sounds decreased cognitive reactions and attentional engagement in people susceptible to smartphone use. The results contribute to the understanding of religious distraction, in the context of this study as a distraction of students' time, concentration and mental engagement from religious practices due to the use of social media. It can involve looking at notifications during Namaz, delaying Namaz, not concentrating on the Quran recitation or zikr, and spending time online that could otherwise be used for religious activities. This definition does not assume that the use of social media is always harmful, but rather that there is a difference between good and bad use of social media, with the bad use being one that may hinder worship.

The exposure of students to religious, non-religious and secular views is also happening in the same personalized feed on social media. This exposure can foster discussion and understanding, as well as confusion, selective exposure, and ideological echo chambers. Haq and Kwok (2024) discovered that the religious social media boosted exposure to diversity while simultaneously promoting group boundaries and superficial interactions with other faiths. In this context, students might come across consumerism, individualism, material success, and conflicting moralities along with religious messages. Individual level secularization is used in the present study to refer to a perceived decline in the salience of religion in daily life, priorities, values and practices, not to political secularism or to a rejection of religion. This can include more attention to worldly issues, less trust in traditional religious figures, or more tolerance of values that are in opposition to the traditional religious teachings. The relationship between religion and social media is complex as already

confirmed in existing research in Pakistan. However, Buzdar et al. (2020) discovered that religious orientation was significantly associated with social media disorder among Muslim university students, but they were concerned with problematic use of social media and not with religious distraction. Safdar, Riaz and Khan (2021) found that social media had an impact on Islamic cultural values among students in South Punjab and Mughal, Hassan and Hassan (2023) explored the perceptions of students regarding the online religious preaching in Lahore. These studies are helpful but do not all look at distraction and secularization as related constructs. Although there is a significant amount of research on digital religion, there is a missing link in the context of higher education in Pakistan. International research has been conducted on online religious identity, shifting authority, digital religious communities and cognitive implications of using a smartphone, while local research has concentrated primarily on social media disorder, Islamic cultural values, or online preaching. There has been limited research that has explored the perception of students that social media is interfering with their religious practices and also fostering secular, materialistic or worldly orientations. This is particularly true of the public universities in Multan where students from various academic programmes and social backgrounds interact with digital platforms to a high degree yet are underrepresented in empirical research. University students are a significant segment of society as higher education is linked to greater independence, intellectual diversity, social mobility, and exposure to diverse ideas. Meanwhile, students are using social media to communicate, entertain, express themselves, learn about religion, and for academic purposes. The study of this population can thus shed light on whether the social media is perceived only as a means of communication or as a factor related to shifts in religious attention and daily values. The aim of the study is not to see technology and religion as natural enemies, but to provide evidence based on the context that can help universities, families and religious educators to promote digital literacy, responsible use of platforms and critical evaluation of religious content online among students in South Punjab in particular.

In this context, the study explores social media based religious distraction and individual level secularization among students of two public universities of Multan, Pakistan. It aims to find out how students feel about the use of social media and its effect on concentration during religious practices, interfering with prayer and zikr, and the weakening of participation in religious activities like Namaz, Juma'ah, zikr, and majlis. It also explores the students' perception of the secular, materialistic and worldly values promoted by social media and the association of religious distraction with individual level secularization. The study also makes comparisons between these perceptions by gender, age and study programme. The research brings these dimensions together and offers a more focused analysis than the existing literature in Pakistan, which focuses on cultural change in general or online preaching in particular, and how it connects with religious attention and value orientation. The study also makes a contribution to digital religion studies because it provides evidence from a Muslim majority, public university context which has been under-researched in the international literature. The cross-sectional design and self-reported perceptions are interpreted as associations and not direct causal effects. This is significant because the way people behave religiously is also influenced by their family background, their own level of commitment, peer influence, the educational context and what they choose to follow online. It thus provides an evidence-based basis for educational and religious interventions in universities.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the extent to which university students perceive social media as distracting them from religious practices, including Namaz, Quranic recitation, zikr and other spiritual activities.
2. To assess students' perceptions of the role of social media in promoting secular, materialistic and worldly values.
3. To investigate the relationship between social-media-related religious distraction and individual-level secularization among university students.
4. To determine whether perceptions of religious distraction and secularization differ according to selected demographic and academic characteristics, including gender, age and study programme.

1.2. Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent do university students perceive social media as distracting them from religious practices?

RQ2: To what extent do university students perceive social media as promoting secular, materialistic and worldly values?

1.3. Research Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no statistically significant relationship between social-media-related religious distraction and individual-level secularization among university students.

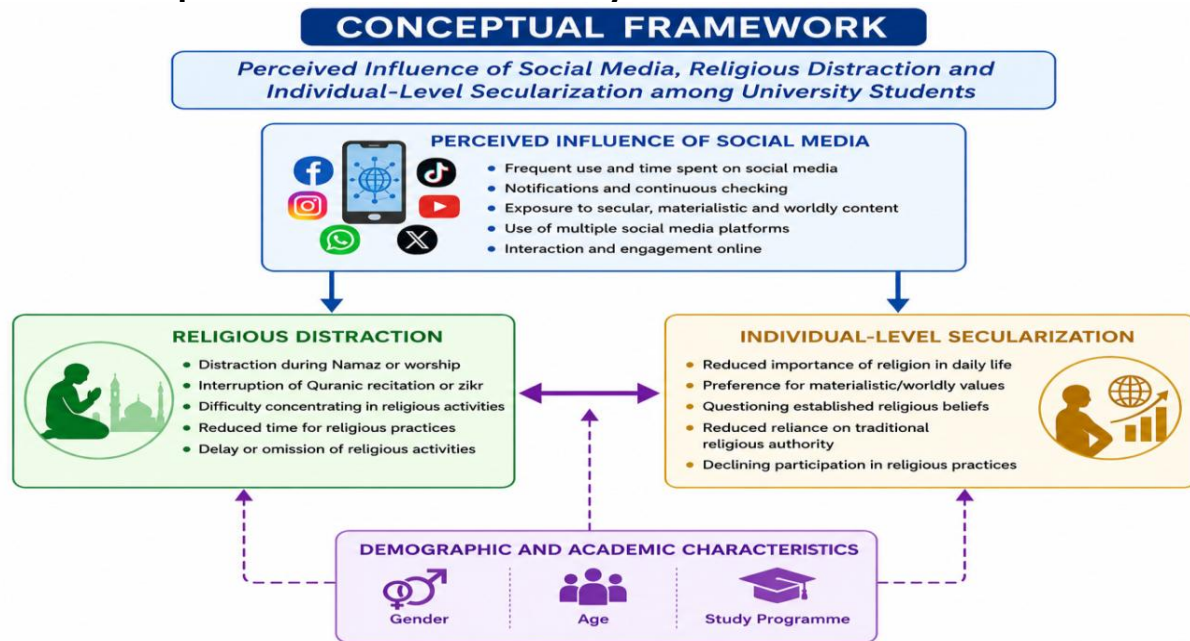
H₁: There is statistically significant relationship between social-media-related religious distraction and individual-level secularization among university students.

H₀₂: There are no statistically significant differences in students' perceptions of religious distraction and secularization according to gender, age and study programme.

H₂: There are statistically significant differences in students' perceptions of religious distraction and secularization according to gender, age and study programme.

1.4. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study



2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The study used a quantitative, cross sectional, descriptive-correlational survey design. The descriptive part was employed to identify students' perceived religious distraction and individual level secularization, and the correlational part was employed to investigate the relationship between religious distraction and individual level secularization. The design also allowed for comparisons between gender, age and study programme without influencing the use of social media and religious behaviour of the participants. Cross sectional survey design is suitable for studying perceptions, differences between groups and relationships between variables at a specific time (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

2.2. Study Design and Study Population

The study was carried out in two public sector universities of Multan city namely Bahauddin Zakariya University and The Women University Multan. The population targeted was about 1100 students in selected science and social-science departments in the two institutions. The students were selected from 16 academic departments and various levels of programmes as they were frequent users of social media and could offer relevant information regarding the perceived impact

of social media on religious beliefs, values and practices. Students with a variety of academic backgrounds also helped to foster a wider sense of religious distraction and secularization in the context of the university.

2.3. Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The total sample was 255 students from the selected department and academic programme. Multistage sampling technique with proportional departmental and programme level allocation was used. The institutional settings were first chosen as the two universities, then the relevant departments of science and social-science were identified and finally the eligible students were selected from BS, MS/M.Phil and Ph.D. programmes. This was appropriate as the target population was spread across a number of departments and programme categories, and it would not have been easy to select from a list of all programmes across the university.

2.4. Research Instrument

The data were obtained using a researcher-made questionnaire that was designed according to the study objectives and the literature related to social media and religious practices. The complete instrument included demographic questions, 34 closed-ended statements. The closed-ended statements concerned religious distraction, social comparison, religious misunderstanding, secularization, access to religious information and online community building. Answers were given on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Only demographic data and items directly measuring religious distraction and individual-level secularization were used in the present analysis.

2.5. Measurement of Religious Distraction

Religious distraction was assessed using five statements that examined the extent to which social media interfered with students' religious and spiritual practices. The items studied included social media's impact on reducing the spirituality of religious practices, on attendance at Namaz, on interruption of Namaz, zikr, majlis and other religious activities with notifications, on concentration during Namaz, zikr, majlis and other religious activities, and on reducing participation in religious activities. The five item scores were averaged to create a composite religious-distraction score, with higher scores representing greater perceived religious-distraction. Items that were primarily related to misinformation and/or disconnection from family customs were not included as they did not directly assess attentional or behavioural distraction.

2.6. Measurement of Individual-level Secularization

Secularization at the individual level was measured through four statements that considered whether social media encouraged secular values over religious values, whether social media encouraged an emphasis on worldly concerns over spiritual growth, whether social media exposed students to content that contradicted established religious values, and whether social media had an impact on moral and ethical viewpoints. The scores for the items were averaged to form a composite secularization score, with higher scores indicating a greater perceived secular, materialistic or worldly influence. The statement about religious scholars deceiving young people was omitted as it was not a sign of secularization, but rather misinformation and religious authority.

2.6. Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire underwent face and content validation to assess the clarity, relevance and alignment of its statements with the study objectives. It was then pilot tested with respondents who were similar to the target population to identify any unclear wording and practical difficulties prior to the main survey. Pilot testing enhances the feasibility and appropriateness of research instruments and administration procedures (Arain et al., 2010). The overall internal consistency of the complete 34 item questionnaire, measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, was .774. The consistency of the article-specific constructs was also assessed using Cronbach's alpha as reliability should be assessed for each group of items measuring a specific concept (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

2.7. Data Collection Procedure

The relevant university and departmental authorities gave permission to do the study. Eligible students were informed about the purpose of the research and asked to participate on a voluntary basis. Questionnaires were sent to the departments selected and adequate time was allotted for the completion of the questionnaires. Questionnaires were sent back and checked for completeness and accuracy of data entry prior to coding. Responses that were invalid or out of range were not imputed but considered missing. Of the 275 questionnaires that were returned, 20 questionnaires were eliminated due to screening and cleaning, leaving 255 questionnaires for statistical analysis.

2.8. Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Participants' demographic characteristics were described using frequencies and percentages, and means, standard deviations and decision categories were calculated for the religious-distraction and secularization statements. Each construct was measured by the appropriate items, which were averaged to form composite scores. The relationship between religious distraction and individual level secularization was explored using Pearson's product-moment correlation. Independent-samples t-tests were used to test for gender differences and one-way analysis of variance was used to test for age and study-programme differences. When the assumption of equal variances was not met, Welch's ANOVA was used. The level of significance was set at .05 and effect sizes were reported to provide information about the size of any differences observed.

2.9. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were upheld during the study. The participants were told the academic purpose of the research and informed consent was obtained prior to completing the questionnaire. The participation was voluntary, and the respondents were free to refuse or withdraw without academic consequences. No personally identifiable information was provided in the analysis and all responses were kept confidential and reported as aggregates. Due to the sensitive nature of religious beliefs and practices, special care was taken in the presentation of the findings.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Analysis

3.1.1. Descriptive Analysis of Demographic Profile of Respondents

In this cross-sectional study, finally, 255 university students were included in the sample. The majority of the sample was female (168, 65.9%) and 87 (34.1%) were male. When it comes to age, the highest number of respondents were in the age group 19-22 years (119 respondents, 46.7%). This was followed by 98 students (38.4%) aged 23-25 years, whereas 38 respondents (14.9%) were aged 26-28 years. As far as study programme is concerned, majority of the respondents were studying in BS programmes (172 respondents 67.5%). There were 64 students (25.1%) enrolled in MS/M.Phil. programmes and 19 respondents (7.5%) were Ph.D. students. The overall sample consisted of more females, younger students and undergraduate students.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 255)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	87	34.1
	Female	168	65.9
Age	19-22 years	119	46.7
	23-25 years	98	38.4
	26-28 years	38	14.9
Study programme	BS	172	67.5
	MS/M.Phil.	64	25.1
	Ph.D.	19	7.5

3.1.2. Descriptive Analysis of Religious Distraction

Table 2 shows that all five statements related to religious distraction were decided upon as Agree with mean scores ranging from 3.80 to 4.07. The highest mean was obtained for the statement that social media has caused reduction in participation/attendance in religious activities like Namaz (M = 4.07, SD = 0.92). This was followed by the perception that social media has made religious activities less spiritual (M = 3.98, SD = 0.96) and that it has disrupted the time for prayer or

meditation ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.99$). Respondents also agreed that social media has an impact on their concentration in Juma'ah, zikr, majlis and other religious activities ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.11$). The least mean was found for the negative impact on participation in religious activities ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.06$); however, this was still in the agreement category. The results show that generally students felt that the social media affected their concentration, spirituality and participation in religious activities.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Respondents' Perceptions Regarding Religious Distraction

S. #	Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Social media has decreased the spirituality of religious practices.	3.98	0.96	Agree
2	Social media has reduced attendance or participation in religious practices such as Namaz.	4.07	0.92	Agree
3	Social media notifications interrupt prayer or meditation time.	3.94	0.99	Agree
4	Social media affects concentration during Juma'ah, zikr, majlis or other religious activities.	3.87	1.11	Agree
5	Social media negatively affects participation in religious activities.	3.80	1.06	Agree

Decision rule: 1.00–1.80 = Strongly Disagree; 1.81–2.60 = Disagree; 2.61–3.40 = Neutral; 3.41–4.20 = Agree; 4.21–5.00 = Strongly Agree (Pimentel, 2010).

3.1.3. Descriptive Analysis of Individual-Level Secularization

The mean scores of the respondents on the four statements regarding secularization at the individual level range between 3.72 and 3.82, as shown in Table 3, suggesting that the respondents agreed with all four statements. The highest mean was found for the statement that social media affects opinions about morality and ethics ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.04$), indicating that it is common for students to perceive digital content as having an impact on their moral and ethical opinions. Respondents also indicated that they believed that social media leads to a focus on worldly matters rather than spiritual development ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.03$). The highest mean score was for engagement with online platforms that conflict with scholars' religious values ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.08$) and the lowest mean score was for the promotion of secular values over religious values ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.98$). Although there were some differences between the items, all of the mean scores were in the agreement range. Thus, the findings indicate that students, in general, saw social media as having a positive impact on the promotion of secular, worldly and morally divergent perspectives.

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis of Respondents' Perceptions Regarding Individual-Level Secularization

S. #	Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Social media promotes secular values over religious values.	3.72	0.98	Agree
2	Social media encourages people to prioritize worldly concerns over spiritual growth.	3.79	1.03	Agree
3	People engage with online platforms that conflict with scholars' religious values.	3.73	1.08	Agree
4	Social media influences opinions concerning morality and ethics.	3.82	1.04	Agree

Decision rule: 1.00–1.80 = Strongly Disagree; 1.81–2.60 = Disagree; 2.61–3.40 = Neutral; 3.41–4.20 = Agree; 4.21–5.00 = Strongly Agree (Pimentel, 2010).

3.2. Inferential Analysis and Hypotheses Testing

3.2.1. Relationship between Religious Distraction and Individual-Level Secularization

A Pearson product-moment correlation was used to investigate the correlation between perceived religious distraction and individual level secularization. Five religious-distraction items and four secularization items were combined to form composite scores. There was one incomplete case, so 254 cases were used. As is seen in Table 4, there is a statistically significant positive correlation between religious distraction and individual-level secularization, $r(252) = .223$, $p < .001$. The positive coefficient suggests that the more students felt distracted from religious practices, the more they felt that social media had a secular, materialistic and worldly influence. But the correlation was small, indicating that, while there is a relationship between religious distraction and secularization, these are different constructs and other personal, social and institutional factors may also play a role. Hence, the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between social-media related religious distraction and individual-level secularization was rejected. The alternative

hypothesis was supported. However, as the study was a cross-sectional self-reported study, the result is a correlation and not a causal effect of religious distraction on secularization.

Table 4: Correlation between Religious Distraction and Individual-Level Secularization

Variables	N	Mean	SD	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	Decision	
1. Religious distraction	254	3.93	0.56	0.223	< .001	Significant relationship	positive
2. Individual-level secularization	254	3.76	0.55				

Note: Pearson correlation was two-tailed. The 95% confidence interval for the correlation was [.103, .337]. Statistical significance was determined at $p < .05$.

3.2.2. Differences in Religious Distraction and Individual-Level Secularization by Demographic and Academic Characteristics

As can be seen in Table 5, there was a significant difference between the two groups on religious distraction as a function of gender, $t(253) = 2.31$, $p = .022$. The mean scores for religious distraction were higher for the male students ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.49$) than for the female students ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.58$). The effect size was small ($d = 0.31$), which means that the gender difference was statistically significant but not very large. However, there was no significant difference between the secularization scores of male and female students, $t(252) = -0.23$, $p = .820$. An age difference was also statistically significant for religious distraction, $F(2, 252) = 4.20$, $p = .016$. The highest mean score was obtained by the students in the age group 23-25 years followed by 26-28 years and 19-22 years. Tukey's post hoc test revealed that the significant difference was between the 23-25 year group and the 19-22 year group, the latter reporting less religious distraction. But the effect size was small ($\eta^2 = .032$). No significant age difference was found for individual level secularization, Welch's $F(2, 96.76) = 0.90$, $p = .411$. There was also no significant difference in religious distraction and secularization between the study programmes. The mean religious-distraction score was highest for Ph.D. students followed by MS/M.Phil. and BS students, but these differences were not statistically significant, $F(2, 252) = 1.22$, $p = .296$. Likewise, there were no significant differences between the secularization scores of BS, MS/M.Phil. and Ph.D. students $F(2, 251) = 0.24$, $p = .784$. In general, there were only gender and age differences in religious distraction, while secularization and study programme did not show any differences.

Table 5: Cumulative Comparison of Religious Distraction and Secularization by Gender, Age and Study Programme

S. #	Characteristic	Outcome	Group statistics, $M \pm SD$	Statistical test	<i>p</i>	Effect size	Decision
1	Gender	Religious distraction	Male: 4.04 ± 0.49 ; Female: 3.88 ± 0.58	$t(253) = 2.31$	.022	$d = 0.31$	Significant; males reported greater distraction
2	Gender	Individual-level secularization	Male: 3.75 ± 0.52 ; Female: 3.77 ± 0.56	$t(252) = -0.23$	.820	$d = 0.03$	Not significant
3	Age	Religious distraction	19-22 years: 3.83 ± 0.58 ; 23-25 years: 4.05 ± 0.51 ; 26-28 years: 3.95 ± 0.56	$F(2, 252) = 4.20$	.016	$\eta^2 = .032$	Significant; 23-25-year-olds scored higher than 19-22-year-olds
4	Age	Individual-level secularization	19-22 years: 3.72 ± 0.48 ; 23-25 years: 3.80 ± 0.61 ; 26-28 years: 3.83 ± 0.60	Welch's $F(2, 96.76) = 0.90$	.411	$\eta^2 = .007$	Not significant
5	Study programme	Religious distraction	BS: 3.90 ± 0.55 ; MS/M.Phil.: 4.00 ± 0.53 ; Ph.D.: 4.04 ± 0.66	$F(2, 252) = 1.22$	.296	$\eta^2 = .010$	Not significant
6	Study programme	Individual-level secularization	BS: 3.78 ± 0.52 ; MS/M.Phil.: 3.72 ± 0.59 ; Ph.D.: 3.79 ± 0.69	$F(2, 251) = 0.24$	.784	$\eta^2 = .002$	Not significant

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; d = Cohen's d ; η^2 = eta squared. An independent-samples t -test was used for gender, while one-way ANOVA was used for age and study programme. Welch's ANOVA was applied to age differences in secularization because the homogeneity-of-variance assumption was not satisfied. One response was missing from the secularization measure. Statistical significance was determined at $p < .05$.

4. Discussion

The general attitude of the university students towards social media was that it was a source of religious distraction. The highest consensus was on reduced attendance or participation in practice of Namaz, decreased spirituality, interruptions during Namaz or majlis and reduced concentration during Juma'ah, zikr and majlis. This could be due to the attention-grabbing aspects of smartphones, such as notifications, frequent checking, short-form videos, and endless scrolling. Stothart, Mitchum and Yehnert (2015) discovered that notifications interfered with attention even in the absence of a response, and Upshaw et al. (2022) observed reduced cognitive responses and attentional engagement after notification sounds. Using smartphones in a fragmented way has also been found to be linked to distraction and task delay (Siebers, Beyens, & Valkenburg, 2024), while high social media use can lead to information overload and reduced self-regulation in students (Ma, Liu, & Zhang, 2025). These findings, however, are only perceived interference and do not necessarily prove

that smartphones automatically reduce religious concentration, as research on the relationship between the presence of smartphones and cognition is mixed (Böttger, Poschik, & Zierer, 2023; Liebherr et al., 2020; Wilmer, Sherman, & Chein, 2017).

Students also agreed that social media was fostering secular, materialistic and worldly values and was impacting moral and ethical perspectives. These findings are not necessarily signs of rejection of religion, but rather signs of a shift towards more personalised, selective and media-influenced interpretations of religion. Social media situate religious teachings, consumer lifestyles, political debates and other non-religious perspectives in the same personalised feeds. Zaid et al. (2022) indicated that Muslim influencers are increasingly reframing religious authority in visually appealing and lifestyle-oriented content, while Solahudin and Fakhruroji (2019) revealed that social media are conducive to Islamic learning, but also promote conflicting interpretations and religious populism. Andok (2024) also noted that the internet has become a factor that affects the perception of religious authority in terms of online visibility, charisma and audience engagement. Selective exposure, uncertainty and echo chambers can result from exposure to diverse viewpoints, but it can also expand understanding. Haq and Kwok (2024) found that religious social media increased exposure to other religions, but also created and reinforced group boundaries. The results thus indicate that secularization in the present study is not a matter of the abandonment of religious belief but of a decrease in the salience of religion and an increase in the salience of worldly priorities.

A statistically significant but weak positive relationship was detected between religious distraction and individual level secularization. Students who felt more disrupted in their religious practices also tended to feel more secular and worldly influences from social media. This association can happen because worship can become less significant in day-to-day life due to repeated displacement, and because of ongoing exposure to other lifestyles and values, which can shape personal priorities. But the low correlation suggests that the two constructs are related but different and that only a small part of the secularization process can be explained by religious distraction. Other factors such as family socialization, personal religiosity, peer influence, self-regulation and the kind of online content followed may also influence religious outcomes. Buzdar et al. (2020) reported that among the Pakistani Muslim students, intrinsic religious orientation was negatively correlated with social-media disorder while extrinsic and quest orientations were positively correlated. Moreover, social media are not inherently anti-religious. They can enhance religious networks and access to religious resources (Ferguson, Ecklund, & Rothschild, 2021), strengthen religious identity among some Pakistani youth (Bano & Hafeez, 2025), and encourage digital religious engagement among Generation Z (Liu et al., 2025).

Gender and age of the students had a significant impact on religious distraction, but the effect sizes were small. Male students found to be more distracted than female students and students aged 23-25 years were more distracted than students aged 19-22 years. Such discrepancies might be due to variation in content preferences, self-regulation, social responsibilities and platform usage patterns and not necessarily due to gender or age alone. Past studies have yielded varying results, with Varchetta et al. (2024) showing that males were more likely to be addicted to the internet and gaming, but females to social media and phones, and Liu (2025) finding no overall gender difference in mobile social-media dependence. Secularization was not significantly different between the two genders or the two age groups, indicating that worldly and secular content is experienced by all student groups. Likewise, there was no significant difference between religious distraction and secularization between BS, MS/M.Phil. and Ph.D. programmes. This means that the impact of social media is not limited to any particular academic level, as students in all programmes access the same social media and are exposed to the same algorithmically recommended content. In general, the demographic factors accounted for a small amount of variance in students' religious experiences.

5. Conclusion

According to this study, students of two public universities in Multan, in general, had a negative attitude towards the impact of social media on religious practices, as it was found that social media distracts students from religious activities, disrupts their concentration, interferes with their prayers and meditation and also affects their participation in Namaz, Juma'ah, zikr and majlis. They

also linked social media with an increased focus on secular, materialistic and worldly values. There was a weak positive relationship between religious distraction and individual-level secularization that was statistically significant. There was a significant difference in religious distraction between male students and students aged 23-25 years, but the difference was small. There were no significant differences in religious distraction between the study programmes, and no significant differences in secularization between the genders, age groups or study programmes. In general, the impact of social media on students' religious life seems to be complex. It can be used to access religious information but can also be used in ways that may impact worship and expose pupils to conflicting values if used frequently and not well regulated. The study was cross-sectional and relied on self-perceptions, thus the results suggest associations and not direct causal effects.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

The study has some limitations. The cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences to be made about the causal relationship between social media and religious distraction or secularization, and there may be self-report biases due to social desirability, recall error, and varying definitions of religious practice. The small correlation and effect sizes suggest that social media is just one component of a broader web of personal, familial, educational and cultural factors. Future research should be conducted using a survey in conjunction with a smartphone-use log, notification record, interviews and longitudinal measurement of religious practices. It would also be helpful to differentiate between religious, educational, entertainment and social use of digital platforms, as this would give a more accurate description of how social media can be a help or a hindrance to religious engagement.

5.2. Implications of the Study

The results have significant practical implications. Social media should not be viewed as a threat by universities and should be encouraged to be used in a purposeful and self-regulated manner. It could be helpful for students to switch off unnecessary notifications while they are at Namaz and studying religion, to have device-free periods, and to evaluate the qualifications of religious speakers online. In addition, religious educators should employ credible and engaging digital forms as visually appealing and interactive content can inspire positive digital religious participation. Meanwhile, digital-literacy education should also cover misinformation and algorithmic echo chambers, as well as scholarly authority versus online popularity.

5.3. Recommendations

Digital-wellbeing and media-literacy programmes should be offered in universities to assist students in managing their time on devices, notifications and exposure to misleading religious content. The students should check religious information from qualified scholars and recognised institutions and not solely from influencers and short videos. Practical measures should be implemented to regulate students' use of devices, such as turning off unnecessary notifications during Namaz, reciting the Quran and zikr, limiting screen time and having device-free zones for worship and reflection. The need for religious educators is to be more active on social media with accurate, engaging and youth friendly content. There is also a possibility for universities to hold seminars on the ethical use of social media, online religious misinformation and responsible digital participation. Future studies should involve universities across regions, be longitudinal or mixed-methods, and differentiate between religious, academic, entertainment and passive social media use. There should also be objective measurements like screen time and how many notifications are received.

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