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STREAMING PLATFORMS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS: INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTS OF NETFLIX FILMS ON ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, AND STRESS AMONG YOUTH

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Abstract

Streaming services now occupy a routine place in youth entertainment, but their relationship with mental health has received limited empirical attention in Pakistan. This study investigated whether the frequency of Netflix film consumption was related to anxiety, depression, and perceived stress among youth in Rawalpindi and Islamabad and whether these outcomes differed between participants who mainly watched horror films and those who mainly watched thriller films. The study was informed by Uses and Gratifications Theory and Affective Disposition Theory and used a cross-sectional quantitative survey design. Data were collected from 452 active Netflix users aged 18-29 years through a structured self-administered questionnaire and analyzed in SPSS version 26. The analyses included descriptive statistics, reliability testing, Pearson correlations, regression analyses, and independent-samples t tests. Netflix consumption frequency showed positive correlations with anxiety ($r = .41$), depression ($r = .38$), and perceived stress ($r = .44$), with all three relationships significant at $p < .001$. The regression models explained 16.8% of the variance in anxiety, 14.4% in depression, and 19.4% in perceived stress. Participants who mainly watched horror films also reported higher anxiety, depression, and perceived stress than those who mainly watched thriller films. Taken together, the results show that both viewing frequency and film genre are relevant when examining psychological distress among Pakistani youth. The study adds evidence from a non-Western setting and points to the importance of balanced streaming habits and greater awareness of responses to emotionally intense content.

INTRODUCTION

For many young people, watching a film is no longer tied to a television schedule. Subscription video-on-demand services allow viewers to choose what to watch, when to watch it, and how long to

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continue. Netflix is a prominent part of this shift because it combines a large content library with personalized recommendations and uninterrupted access (Lobato, 2023; Pittman & Sheehan, 2021). These features make viewing convenient, but they also make long sessions, repeated viewing, and late-night use easier. As streaming becomes embedded in everyday life, questions about its relationship with youth psychological well-being have become increasingly relevant.

This issue deserves attention because anxiety, depression, and stress are already important concerns during adolescence and young adulthood. The World Health Organization (2023) identifies anxiety and depressive disorders as major contributors to illness and disability in younger populations. Digital media, meanwhile, form part of the same daily environment in which young people study, socialize, and relax. Current reviews caution against treating every form of screen exposure as equivalent; psychological outcomes can vary according to the activity, content, context, and pattern of use (Odgers & Jensen, 2024; Sanders et al., 2023). Streaming therefore needs to be examined as a specific media practice rather than simply as another number of screen-time hours.

Research across digital-media settings suggests that intensive or poorly regulated use can accompany psychological difficulties, although the size and direction of these associations are not identical in every study (Keles et al., 2023; Maras et al., 2022). Streaming research has raised similar concerns. Extended viewing has been connected with sleep disruption and fatigue, and binge-watching has been discussed in relation to less favorable emotional outcomes (Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017; Steiner & Xu, 2023). More recent work has also reported links between problematic binge-watching and depression, anxiety, and stress (Özkent & Akdoğan, 2025). This body of evidence makes frequency and intensity of viewing important variables for closer investigation.

At the same time, frequent streaming cannot be understood only as an exposure problem because viewers actively choose media for particular reasons. Uses and Gratifications Theory proposes that people select media to meet needs such as entertainment, escape, relaxation, and mood management (Katz et al., 1973). A young person who feels bored or stressed may therefore turn to Netflix deliberately. The immediate experience may be enjoyable or calming, yet repeated viewing can also compete with sleep, social contact, physical activity, academic work, and other responsibilities (Reinecke & Rieger, 2023). The same behavior can therefore provide short-term gratification while being associated with less favorable psychological outcomes when it becomes prolonged or habitual.

What viewers watch may matter alongside how often they watch. Horror and thriller films are both emotionally engaging, but the emotional experience they are designed to produce is not identical. Horror commonly centers on fear, danger, shock, and threat, whereas thrillers often build tension through suspense, uncertainty, and anticipation. Affective Disposition Theory is useful here because it links media responses to the viewer's affective reactions to characters and narrative events (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). If fear-based material produces a stronger or more persistent emotional response for some viewers, repeated exposure may be associated with different psychological outcomes than suspense-oriented content. Studies of horror media similarly emphasize strong emotional arousal and differences in the way viewers regulate fear (Millar & Lee, 2021; Scrivner et al., 2021).

The Pakistani setting adds an important contextual dimension. A large share of the published literature on digital media and mental health comes from Western or high-income societies, yet media routines, social expectations, coping resources, and access to mental-health services are not uniform across countries (Holmes et al., 2024; Patel et al., 2023). Rawalpindi and Islamabad have sizeable populations of university-

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and college-age youth with ready access to online entertainment. Despite this, evidence that examines Netflix film use, genre preference, and several psychological outcomes together remains limited in these cities.

Against this background, the study examined whether more frequent Netflix film consumption was associated with anxiety, depression, and perceived stress among youth in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. A second aim was to determine whether participants who mainly watched horror films differed from those who mainly watched thriller films on the same psychological outcomes. Considering viewing frequency and content type within one analysis makes it possible to distinguish two aspects of streaming behavior that are often combined under broad measures of screen use.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Uses and Gratifications Theory guides the frequency component of the research. Rather than viewing audiences as passive recipients, the theory treats media use as purposeful behavior directed toward particular needs (Katz et al., 1973). Netflix may be selected for entertainment, escape, or mood regulation, especially when a viewer wants relief from boredom or everyday pressure. Yet frequent use can become part of a routine that extends beyond the original purpose of relaxation. On this basis, the study proposed that higher Netflix film-consumption frequency would be positively related to anxiety, depression, and perceived stress.

The genre component is grounded in Affective Disposition Theory. The theory focuses on the emotional responses that develop as viewers engage with characters, threats, and outcomes in a narrative (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). Because horror films deliberately intensify fear and threat-related arousal, while thrillers more commonly build suspense and anticipation, the two genres may not be psychologically equivalent. This distinction provided the rationale for expecting higher levels of distress among participants whose primary Netflix film genre was horror.

H1: Frequency of Netflix films consumption positively predicts anxiety levels among youth.
H2: Frequency of Netflix films consumption positively predicts depression levels among youth.
H3: Frequency of Netflix films consumption positively predicts perceived stress among youth.
H4: Youth who are exposed to horror films will report significantly higher anxiety levels compared with youth who are exposed to thriller films.
H5: Youth who consume horror films will report significantly higher levels of depression compared with youth who consume thriller films.
H6: Youth who watch horror films will report significantly higher perceived stress than youth who watch thriller films.

Method

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was used within a positivist and deductive framework. The design suited the study because the research questions required statistical testing of predefined hypotheses, estimation of relationships among measured variables, and comparison of two independent genre groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). All data were collected within a single period. The analyses therefore describe associations and statistical prediction in the sample; they do not establish temporal sequence or causation.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were active Netflix users between 18 and 29 years of age and were living in Rawalpindi or Islamabad, Pakistan. The final sample contained 452 respondents. Because no complete sampling frame of young Netflix users was available, participants were recruited through non-probability convenience sampling from universities, colleges, and online channels in the two cities. This approach is commonly used when a clearly defined population is accessible but a full sampling list is unavailable (Etikan et al., 2016).

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Measures

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic section recorded gender, age group, city of residence, and educational level. Participants also identified the Netflix film genre they watched most often. For the planned group comparisons, this response was used to classify participants into a horror-film group or a thriller-film group.

Netflix Film Consumption Frequency

Netflix film-consumption frequency was represented by five self-report items covering regular viewing, time spent watching, late-night use, and the tendency to continue viewing after starting. All items used the questionnaire's five-point Likert-type response format from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Higher composite scores represented more frequent or intensive consumption. Reliability in the present sample was satisfactory, with Cronbach's α = .82.

Anxiety, Depression, and Perceived Stress

Anxiety, depression, and perceived stress were assessed through questionnaire items informed by established measures used in psychological research. Anxiety items drew on the Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006; Löwe et al., 2008), depression items on the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9; Kroenke et al., 2001), and stress items on the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10; Cohen et al., 1983; Taylor, 2015). In the dataset used for this study, each construct was represented by five items administered using the common five-point response format of the questionnaire. The resulting scales showed good internal consistency: α = .85 for anxiety, .88 for depression, and .86 for perceived stress.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Questionnaires were completed either online or face to face. Before responding, participants were informed that the study was being conducted for academic research and that participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained, anonymity and confidentiality were explained, and participants could withdraw. No personally identifying information was collected.

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted in SPSS version 26. Participant characteristics and study variables were summarized with frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Cronbach's α was used to examine internal consistency. Pearson correlations assessed bivariate relationships among Netflix consumption frequency, anxiety, depression, and perceived stress. Regression models tested H1-H3 by estimating the statistical prediction of each psychological outcome from Netflix consumption frequency. H4-H6 were examined with independent-samples *t* tests comparing the horror and thriller groups. Statistical significance was assessed at $p < .05$.

Results

Participant Characteristics

The 452 respondents were distributed relatively evenly by gender and city. Females accounted for 52.7% of the sample and males for 47.3%, while 52.9% lived in Rawalpindi and 47.1% in Islamabad. The 18-21-year age group was the largest (42.5%), followed by those aged 22-25 years (36.9%) and 26-29 years (20.6%). Nearly half of the respondents were studying at bachelor's level (46.7%). For genre preference, 241 participants (53.3%) identified horror as the Netflix film genre they watched most often, compared with 211 participants (46.7%) who identified thriller.

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Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 452)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	214	47.3
	Female	238	52.7
Age	18–21 years	192	42.5
	22–25 years	167	36.9
	26–29 years	93	20.6
City	Rawalpindi	239	52.9
	Islamabad	213	47.1
Education	Intermediate	124	27.4
	Bachelor's	211	46.7
	Master's	87	19.2
	MPhil or higher	30	6.6
Primary genre	Horror	241	53.3
	Thriller	211	46.7

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Average scores showed a broadly similar pattern across the four study variables. Netflix film consumption frequency had a mean of 3.62 (*SD* = 0.81). The corresponding means were 3.48 (*SD* = 0.76) for anxiety, 3.41 (*SD* = 0.79) for depression, and 3.55 (*SD* = 0.74) for perceived stress. Internal consistency was good in every case; Cronbach's α values ranged from .82 to .88.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency of Study Variables

Variable	Items	M	SD	Min	Max	α
Netflix film consumption frequency	5	3.62	0.81	1.40	5.00	.82
Anxiety	5	3.48	0.76	1.20	5.00	.85
Depression	5	3.41	0.79	1.10	5.00	.88
Perceived stress	5	3.55	0.74	1.30	5.00	.86

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha.

Correlations Between Netflix Consumption and Psychological Outcomes

The correlation analysis showed that higher Netflix film-consumption frequency accompanied higher scores on all three psychological outcomes. The association was $r = .41$ with anxiety, $r = .38$ with depression, and $r = .44$ with perceived stress; each was significant at $p < .001$. The psychological

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outcomes were also related to one another. Anxiety correlated with depression at r = .63 and with perceived stress at r = .59, while depression and perceived stress correlated at r = .61, again with p < .001 in each case.

Table 3 Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Netflix consumption frequency	—			
2. Anxiety	.41***	—		
3. Depression	.38***	.63***	—	
4. Perceived stress	.44***	.59***	.61***	—

Note. N = 452. ***p < .001.

Regression Analyses

The regression results were in the predicted direction for H1-H3. Netflix film-consumption frequency significantly predicted anxiety (β = .41, t = 9.53, p < .001), with R^2 = .168, equivalent to 16.8% of the observed variance. For depression, the model produced β = .38, t = 8.71, p < .001, and R^2 = .144. Perceived stress showed the largest coefficient and explained variance: β = .44, t = 10.43, p < .001, with R^2 = .194. These results supported the first three hypotheses.

Table 4 Regression Models Predicting Psychological Outcomes From Netflix Consumption Frequency

Outcome	R^2	F	β	t	p	Decision
Anxiety	.168	90.88	.41	9.53	< .001	Supported
Depression	.144	75.87	.38	8.71	< .001	Supported
Perceived stress	.194	108.79	.44	10.43	< .001	Supported

Note. Each model used Netflix film consumption frequency as the predictor. N = 452.

Genre-Based Differences

The group comparisons also followed the hypothesized pattern. Participants in the horror group reported higher anxiety (M = 3.67, *SD* = 0.72) than those in the thriller group (M = 3.26, *SD* = 0.76), t(450) = 6.01, p < .001. The same pattern appeared for depression, with horror viewers reporting M = 3.60 (*SD* = 0.76) and thriller viewers M = 3.19 (*SD* = 0.79), t(450) = 5.73, p = .001. Perceived stress was likewise higher among horror viewers (M = 3.73, *SD* = 0.70) than thriller viewers (M = 3.34, *SD* = 0.74), t(450) = 5.93, p < .001. H4, H5, and H6 were therefore supported, and all six study hypotheses received statistical support.

Table 5 Independent-Samples t Tests Comparing Horror and Thriller Viewers

Outcome	Genre	n	M	SD	t(450)	p
Anxiety	Horror	241	3.67	0.72	6.01	< .001

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Outcome	Genre	n	M	SD	t(450)	p
	Thriller	211	3.26	0.76		
Depression	Horror	241	3.60	0.76	5.73	.001
	Thriller	211	3.19	0.79		
Perceived stress	Horror	241	3.73	0.70	5.93	< .001
	Thriller	211	3.34	0.74		

Note. Horror n = 241; thriller n = 211. H4, H5, and H6 were supported.

Discussion

Two aspects of Netflix film use were examined: frequency of consumption and primary genre preference. The analyses produced a consistent pattern. Participants who reported more frequent Netflix film consumption also tended to report more anxiety, depression, and perceived stress. Separately, the horror-viewing group scored higher on all three psychological outcomes than the thriller-viewing group. These findings support the study's argument that both the pattern of media use and the nature of the content deserve attention when considering youth psychological well-being.

For anxiety, Netflix consumption frequency showed a moderate positive relationship (r = .41), and the regression model explained 16.8% of the variance. This is compatible with wider evidence that intensive or problematic digital-media use can occur alongside anxiety symptoms in young people (Keles et al., 2023; Maras et al., 2022). Several mechanisms may be relevant, including prolonged arousal, late-night viewing, and reduced recovery time. Sleep is particularly important because binge-viewing has been associated with poorer sleep and fatigue (Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017). The current results cannot identify which mechanism is operating, but they indicate that viewing frequency is meaningfully related to anxiety in this sample.

A similar, although slightly smaller, pattern emerged for depression. Netflix consumption frequency accounted for 14.4% of the variance in depression scores. This percentage is large enough to be statistically meaningful but also makes clear that streaming frequency is only one factor among many that may relate to depressive symptoms. The cross-sectional design does not show that Netflix use produces depression. It is equally plausible that some young people who are already distressed spend more time streaming, or that both processes occur together. Even with this caution, the result is consistent with studies linking intensive digital-media use and problematic binge-watching with poorer mood and psychological well-being (Maras et al., 2022; Özkent & Akdoğan, 2025).

Perceived stress had the strongest relationship with consumption frequency. The correlation was r = .44, and the regression model explained 19.4% of the variance. This result fits the idea that streaming can have two different roles in everyday life. A viewer may start watching to relax after academic or social pressure, but a long session can also reduce time available for sleep, study, or other responsibilities. The resulting time pressure may add to rather than relieve stress (Reinecke & Rieger, 2023). From a Uses and Gratifications perspective, immediate satisfaction and longer-term consequences therefore need not move in the same direction (Katz et al., 1973).

The horror-thriller comparison adds a content-specific dimension to the findings. Across anxiety, depression, and perceived stress, participants who mainly watched horror films reported higher mean scores than those who mainly watched thrillers. This result suggests that emotionally

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intense media should not be treated as a single category. Horror is deliberately constructed around fear, threat, and shock, while thrillers often sustain attention through uncertainty, suspense, and problem solving. Earlier work on horror and fear-based entertainment has likewise emphasized strong emotional activation and variation in viewers' capacity to regulate these reactions (Millar & Lee, 2021; Scrivner et al., 2021).

Affective Disposition Theory helps interpret the genre differences without assuming that every viewer responds in the same way. The emotional effect of a film depends partly on how a viewer evaluates characters, threats, and narrative outcomes (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). Repeated fear-oriented material may therefore leave some viewers with more persistent arousal or negative affect, particularly when they are already under stress. Thrillers can also be intense, but the balance between fear, suspense, anticipation, and cognitive engagement is different. The observed group differences are consistent with this theoretical distinction.

These results should also be read within their local setting. Young people in Rawalpindi and Islamabad manage academic demands, family and social expectations, and uneven access to mental-health support. Research increasingly shows that digital-media effects vary across individuals and contexts rather than following a single universal pattern (Odgers & Jensen, 2024; Valkenburg et al., 2023). Evidence from Pakistani youth is therefore valuable in its own right. The findings do not show that Netflix or horror films are harmful to every viewer; they show that, in this sample, more frequent consumption and a preference for horror were associated with higher psychological-distress scores.

The study also illustrates why broad measures of total screen time can conceal important differences. A single number of daily screen hours may combine study, social communication, gaming, passive viewing, and emotionally intense entertainment even though these activities serve different purposes and produce different experiences (Odgers & Jensen, 2024; Sanders et al., 2023). By examining Netflix film consumption separately and then distinguishing horror from thriller viewing, the present analysis offers a more specific account of how platform use and content may relate to mental health.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical value of the study lies in bringing Uses and Gratifications Theory and Affective Disposition Theory into the same empirical framework. The first perspective helps explain why youth repeatedly choose Netflix, including for entertainment, escape, or mood regulation. The second helps explain why the emotional consequences of viewing may vary across genres. Considered together, the theories suggest that media effects cannot be understood only by asking how much media is consumed; researchers also need to consider why it is selected and what kind of emotional material is being consumed.

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings have practical relevance for parents, educators, counselors, and mental-health professionals, but they do not support treating all streaming as harmful. A more useful approach is to discuss viewing routines as part of a wider lifestyle that also includes sleep, study demands, physical activity, social contact, and recovery time. Young people may benefit from recognizing when viewing sessions become prolonged, when streaming regularly replaces sleep or responsibilities, and when particular fear-based content leaves a lasting emotional response. In counseling or psychoeducation, media habits can be explored alongside other daily factors when a young person reports persistent anxiety, low mood, or stress.

Universities and organizations working with youth can also incorporate digital well-being into media-literacy and mental-health initiatives. Practical messages might focus on monitoring viewing time, noticing when streaming is being used mainly to

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avoid problems, maintaining regular sleep and study routines, and making informed choices about highly arousing content. In Pakistan, where mental-health resources are not equally available, attention to modifiable daily habits can form one component of broader preventive efforts rather than a substitute for professional care (Patel et al., 2023).

Limitations and Future Research

The findings need to be interpreted in light of the study design. Most importantly, cross-sectional data cannot establish which came first. Frequent Netflix use may be associated with later distress, distressed youth may turn to streaming more often, or the two may reinforce one another. Longitudinal designs that follow the same participants over time, as well as experimental studies, would be better suited to examining temporal direction and possible causal mechanisms.

A second limitation is the reliance on self-report. Participants may not recall viewing habits or psychological experiences perfectly, and responses can be influenced by social desirability. Future research could combine questionnaires with objective indicators such as streaming logs, sleep data, or repeated real-time assessments. Generalizability is also limited by convenience sampling. The sample came from Rawalpindi and Islamabad and was recruited through educational and online settings; probability sampling across additional urban and rural populations would provide a stronger basis for population-level conclusions.

The scope of the study was deliberately narrow: it examined Netflix films and compared only horror with thriller viewing. Young people commonly use several entertainment and social platforms, and other genres may show different associations with well-being. Future studies could compare comedy, romance, drama, action, and other categories, as well as different streaming services. It would also be useful to test factors that may explain or modify the observed relationships, including sleep quality, emotion regulation, coping style, personality, social support, and reasons for viewing. Mixed-method designs could add participants' own explanations of why they choose particular content and how they experience it emotionally.

Conclusion

The study found a consistent association between Netflix film-consumption patterns and psychological outcomes among youth in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. More frequent consumption was related to higher anxiety, depression, and perceived stress, while participants who mainly watched horror films scored higher on all three outcomes than those who mainly watched thriller films. The statistical results supported all six hypotheses. At the same time, the cross-sectional design means these relationships should not be interpreted as proof that streaming causes psychological disorders. The main contribution is more specific: viewing frequency and genre preference both carried meaningful information about psychological distress in this Pakistani sample. This supports further research that treats streaming as a differentiated media practice and encourages balanced, reflective viewing habits among youth.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Respondents were told the academic purpose of the research, assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential, and informed of their right to withdraw. No personally identifying information was collected, and the data were used for academic research purposes only.

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