



EDITORIAL

The Social Cost of a Hyperconnected Society

Nearly seventy million Pakistanis are active on social media, broadband has crossed 150 million subscribers, and almost a quarter of the country now names Facebook as its primary source of information about the world. We built the connection faster than we built anything to protect ourselves from what it would cost.

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Introduction

By late 2025, Pakistan had roughly 80 million active social media user identities, according to DataReportal's analysis, out of a population now carrying more than 190 million mobile subscriptions and over 150 million broadband connections across a fibre backbone exceeding 230,000 kilometres. Internet penetration has crossed 60 percent nationally. Mishal Pakistan's 2026 State of Freedom Report found that nearly a quarter of Pakistanis — 24.8 percent — now name Facebook as their primary source of information about the world, ahead of WhatsApp at 19.9 percent and every traditional news outlet combined. We talk about these numbers, when we talk about them at all, as a connectivity success story. They are also a story about what gets displaced when a society moves this much of its attention onto a screen this quickly.

As a clinical psychologist, I see the texture of that displacement in a consulting room long before it shows up in a national statistic. A teenager who cannot fall asleep without checking whether a post has been liked. A marriage strained not by a dramatic betrayal but by two people physically together and attentionally somewhere else, every evening, for years. A parent who cannot get a straight answer from their child about who they were messaging until 2 a.m. None of this is unique to Pakistan — hyperconnectivity's costs are a global phenomenon — but Pakistan is living through it with unusually little public conversation about what is actually happening to family life, attention, and mental health while the infrastructure statistics keep climbing.

"A marriage isn't always broken by a dramatic betrayal. Sometimes it's just two people physically together and attentionally somewhere else, every evening, for years."

What the Research Is Already Finding

Pakistani researchers have been quietly documenting this for several years now, even without much public attention. A 2025 study of young Pakistani adults found excessive social media use significantly associated with higher anxiety, disrupted sleep, and distorted self-perception. A separate study of 162 Pakistani adults aged 18 to 25 found social media addiction linked to increased aggression, an effect that weakened — but did not disappear — among participants with stronger offline social connectedness, suggesting real relationships function as a partial buffer against a problem that digital ones alone cannot solve. An earlier cross-sectional study in the twin



cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi found 60 percent of adolescent smartphone users met criteria for smartphone addiction, with social networking apps the single strongest predictor.

More recent Pakistani research has extended this into daily functioning rather than just mood: a 2025 study found problematic smartphone use significantly associated with worse academic performance among students, a finding that should land hard in a country simultaneously celebrating record youth digital fluency and recording some of the region's weakest learning outcomes. None of these studies describe a dramatic, cinematic harm. They describe something quieter and more pervasive — attention, sleep, mood, and relationships all eroding a little at a time, in a population that has had almost no time to develop the habits of moderation that older hyperconnected societies are only now, belatedly, building for themselves.

The Costs That Don't Make the Infrastructure Reports

Family structure absorbs much of this cost in ways our statistics aren't built to capture. In clinical practice, I increasingly see parents who have effectively lost the ability to supervise their children's inner lives, not from neglect but because the supervision itself has moved somewhere they have no access to — a WhatsApp group, a private Snapchat account, a DM thread that leaves no trace in the shared family space a living room used to be. Mishal Pakistan's own national trust survey found WhatsApp as a primary information source for one in five Pakistanis, which also means it has become a primary channel for family rumour, half-verified health advice, and political misinformation passed uncritically between relatives who trust the sender more than they question the content — a dynamic every Pakistani family with an active group chat will recognise immediately.

There is also a quieter irony sitting underneath Pakistan's hyperconnectivity statistics: the same country racing toward 190 million mobile subscriptions still has sharp urban-rural and gender gaps in who actually benefits from that connection versus who is simply exposed to its costs. Usage data shows men substantially overrepresented on Facebook and Instagram relative to women, even as households across both genders absorb the same disrupted sleep, strained attention, and family friction this magazine's own readers will recognise from their own homes. Hyperconnectivity's benefits and its costs are not distributed evenly, even within the same family, under the same roof.

What's Next?

None of this is an argument for less connectivity — this magazine has spent the better part of a year making the case for more and better digital infrastructure, and I don't disagree with a word of it. It's an argument that infrastructure and wellbeing have to be built together rather than sequentially, with wellbeing treated as an afterthought once the fibre is already in the ground. Pakistani research on this is already strong enough to inform real policy: school-based digital literacy curricula that teach self-regulation alongside coding, clinical training that actually equips general practitioners and school counsellors to recognise problematic use rather than dismissing it as normal teenage behaviour, and public health messaging that treats screen-time moderation the way earlier campaigns treated handwashing or seatbelt use — as a basic, teachable skill, not a moral failing.

Pakistan built its connectivity at extraordinary speed, and that speed is, by every measure this magazine covers, a genuine national achievement. But a society doesn't get credit for how fast it connected if it quietly loses its sleep, its attention, and its family dinners along the way, and never found the time to notice. The infrastructure numbers will keep climbing regardless of what we do next. Whether the people underneath those numbers are better off because of it is still, entirely, an open question — and it deserves a public conversation at least as serious as the one we've already had about broadband.