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Beyond the Blue Tick: Unveiling the Hidden Pressure of Smartphones, Social Media, and Constant Availability Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Smartphones have made round-the-clock reachability technically effortless, yet it remains unclear whether young adults experience this reachability as a free choice or as an unwritten social duty. This study examines the pressure young adults feel to remain constantly available and how that pressure relates to their psychological strain. A cross-sectional survey based on a 25-item structured questionnaire was circulated through Google Forms between 22 and 29 September 2026 using convenience sampling. After repeat submissions and identical-answer patterns were removed, 72 of 84 responses from participants aged 18–29 years were analysed with descriptive statistics, chi-square tests and ordinary least squares regression.

Perceived availability pressure was moderate ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.96$ on a five-point scale) and was positively associated with psychological strain ($r_s = .48$, $p < .001$). It accounted for roughly 24% of the variance in strain, and the association persisted after gender, age band and daily screen time were controlled. Respondents endorsed voluntary-connectivity statements more strongly than obligation statements ($p = .014$), but those leaning towards voluntary connectivity did not report lower stress. Pressure arising from social ties and from work or college did not differ significantly, whereas pressure varied with the primary platform used and was highest among Instagram users. Setting boundaries and rating coping as helpful were linked with higher, not lower, strain, a pattern consistent with reactive coping. Because the sample is non-random and skewed towards female students aged 18–20, the results are indicative rather than generalisable. The paper argues that availability expectations deserve study as a stressor in their own right, distinct from screen time or problematic phone use.

Keywords: constant availability; telepressure; smartphone use; social media; young adults; psychological wellbeing; digital boundaries

1. Introduction

For most young adults, owning a smartphone and belonging to a handful of group chats is a personal decision, usually made gladly because these tools keep friendships alive and provide a sense of belonging. Over time, however, an unspoken rule has settled around that decision: a person is expected to be reachable, more or less continuously. No one announces the rule, yet it is widely understood and quietly enforced.

The generation now aged roughly 18 to 30 has felt this more sharply than earlier ones, because instant messaging was already the default when they came of age. In such an environment a delayed reply is rarely read as a neutral event. It can be taken as disinterest, or as a deliberate snub, and features such as read receipts, “seen” markers, last-active stamps and online-status dots make the delay visible to everyone involved. The blue tick has, in effect, turned private inattention into public information.

Scholarship on the topic points in two directions. One strand emphasises the rewards of connectivity, including enjoyment, closeness and identity built through continuous online presence (Vorderer et al., 2016). Another strand records the costs: unease when the phone is out of reach, guilt over messages left unanswered, and fatigue from being permanently “on” (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Dhir et al., 2018). The present paper sits between these accounts. It asks whether constant availability is something young adults freely choose or something they have gradually been conditioned to expect of themselves and of one another, whether or not they enjoy it.

2. Review of Literature and Theoretical Background

2.1 Permanent connectivity as a way of life

Vorderer et al. (2016) described a “permanently online, permanently connected” (POPC) condition in which university students remain mentally oriented towards their devices even when they are not actively using them. Building on this line of thought, Reinecke et al. (2018) formalised *online vigilance*, the persistent cognitive readiness to attend to online content and communication, and validated a self-report scale for it across several

samples. Both contributions treat constant connection as a psychological orientation rather than a simple usage count, which is close to the way the present study conceives availability.

2.2 From choice to expectation: telepressure and entrapment

Once connectivity becomes the norm, replying quickly starts to function as a social obligation. In the workplace literature, Barber and Santuzzi (2015) named this experience *telepressure*, meaning a preoccupation with responding promptly and an urge to do so, and connected it to weaker recovery from work. Their later work carried the idea to college students who also hold jobs, showing that the cost of staying connected follows people across the school, work and social settings they move between (Barber & Santuzzi, 2017). An equivalent idea appears in research on close friendships. Hall and Baym (2012) found that greater phone-based maintenance of friendships raised expectations of further contact; those expectations produced dependence, which lifted satisfaction, and also overdependence and *entrapment*, defined as guilt and pressure to respond, which lowered it. The same dialectic of closeness and constraint is precisely what this study seeks to capture among young adults.

Interface features amplify the effect. Mai et al. (2015) surveyed Facebook chat users and reported that the “seen” function shaped how people answered, with the need to belong and fear of ostracism helping to explain sensitivity to being seen without replying. Read receipts therefore do not merely report delivery; they convert non-response into a social signal that others can interpret.

2.3 Wellbeing costs: fear of missing out, problematic use and fatigue

Fear of missing out (FoMO) has been linked to lower satisfaction of psychological needs and to a stronger tendency to keep checking social platforms (Przybylski et al., 2013). Reviews of problematic smartphone use report consistent associations with anxiety and depressive symptoms (Elhai et al., 2017), and a prospective cohort of young adults found that heavy mobile phone use was related to later sleep disturbance and depressive symptoms (Thomée et al., 2011). Field evidence also suggests that reducing how often people check messages can lower stress: participants who limited email checking reported less daily stress than those who checked freely (Kushlev & Dunn, 2015). In an Indian sample of adolescent social media users, Dhir et al. (2018) showed that compulsive use and FoMO fed social media fatigue, which in turn predicted anxiety and depression. Taken together, these studies establish that heavy or compulsive use carries psychological costs, but they mostly do so by measuring how much people use, not how much they feel they are required to respond.

2.4 A motivational lens

Self-determination theory distinguishes behaviour driven by autonomous motivation, where a person acts out of interest or endorsed values, from behaviour driven by controlled motivation, where a person acts to satisfy external demands or avoid guilt (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Applied here, the same act of replying to a message can be autonomous on one occasion and controlled on another. The theory therefore predicts that obligation-driven availability should be more strain-inducing than enjoyed connectivity, and it offers a way of reading the possibility that enjoyment and strain may nonetheless coexist within the same person.

3. Research Gap

A considerable body of research addresses smartphone addiction, social media use and mental health, but most of it examines each factor separately, for instance screen time and depression or social media use and anxiety. Much of it concerns general internet or smartphone dependence, or social comparison processes such as FoMO and self-esteem. Comparatively few studies isolate the everyday, largely silent pressure created by “always available” norms, in which young adults feel bound to respond immediately or feel judged for going offline or leaving a message “seen”. Most quantitative work also concentrates on measuring screen time or addiction severity and says little about how young adults themselves justify, endure and cope with this expectation. This study therefore focuses on the pressure that arises specifically from digital availability norms, rather than on smartphone use in general, and examines how far that pressure is associated with psychological strain, where it seems to originate and whether common coping practices are linked with relief.

4. Objectives of the Study

- To examine how young adults perceive and experience the expectation of being constantly available in their personal, social and academic or professional lives.
- To distinguish between connectivity that young adults enjoy and connectivity they feel obliged to maintain.
- To identify the emotional and psychological costs, namely anxiety, guilt, fatigue and fear of missing out, that accompany this pressure.
- To explore where the pressure appears to come from, whether from friends, family, partners, employers or the wider culture of social media.

5. Variables and Hypotheses

The *independent variable* is Perceived Pressure for Constant Availability, defined as the extent to which a young adult feels socially or professionally obliged to stay reachable and respond promptly across digital platforms, irrespective of whether the connectivity is enjoyed. The *dependent variable* is Psychological Wellbeing, covering anxiety, guilt, fatigue and fear of missing out that arise in relation to availability demands. Because the survey items describe negative states, the dependent variable is analysed as *psychological strain*, where a higher score indicates poorer wellbeing.

Consistent with the exploratory intent of the study, the hypotheses below are examined to identify patterns worth pursuing in later confirmatory work; they are not offered as formal proof of causation. Each null hypothesis (H0) is paired with the alternative stated here.

- *H1*: Perceived pressure for constant availability has a significant effect on the psychological wellbeing of young adults. (H0: it has no significant effect.)
- *H2*: Young adults' level of stress differs significantly between voluntary connectivity and obligatory availability. (H0: no significant difference.)
- *H3*: The source of pressure, social relationships versus professional or academic relationships, has a significant effect on the level of availability-related stress. (H0: no significant effect.)
- *H4*: The coping strategies young adults use have a significant effect in reducing the psychological impact of availability pressure. (H0: no significant effect.)

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research design

The study follows an exploratory, cross-sectional survey design. Because few investigations separate the everyday pressure to remain available from problematic phone use or from broad theories of hyperconnectivity, the aim was to gain a preliminary understanding of the phenomenon rather than to confirm a fixed set of predictions. A structured questionnaire was chosen because it allows a wider range of young adults to be reached efficiently and makes broad patterns and associations visible in an under-studied area, even though open-ended methods are more usual in exploratory work.

6.2 Population, sampling and response

The target population comprised young adults aged 18 to 29 years. Non-probability convenience sampling was used: the questionnaire was circulated through messaging groups, social media, college groups and personal networks [add city/state or institutions of respondents], and people took part according to their availability and willingness. The original design intended 120 respondents, 30 in each of four age bands (18–20, 21–23, 24–26 and 27–29 years). Data were collected between 22 and 29 September 2026 and 84 responses were received, short of the target and unevenly spread across age bands. Because sampling was not random, the findings describe this sample and should not be taken as representative of all young adults.

6.3 Data cleaning and analytic sample

Before analysis the data were screened for quality. Where the same respondent had submitted more than once, only the first submission was retained (three repeat submissions removed). Nine further responses in which all twenty attitude items received the same rating were treated as non-differentiated and excluded, since they carry no information about differences between items. This left an analytic sample of $N = 72$. To check that these decisions did not drive the results, the main correlation was recomputed on all 84 raw responses; its direction and significance were unchanged ($r_s = .54$ versus $.48$ in the cleaned sample). Respondent contact identifiers captured by the form were removed before analysis and no individual responses are reported.

6.4 Instrument

Data were gathered with a self-administered questionnaire of 25 close-ended items in four parts: demographic information (age group, gender, occupation, hours of daily smartphone use and the platform used most; five items); digital connectivity and online habits (Q6–Q10); pressure and expectations of constant availability (Q11–Q20); and psychological effects and coping (Q21–Q25). All attitudinal items were rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) (Likert, 1932). The full item list appears in the Appendix.

6.5 Measures

Composite indices were formed as the mean of the relevant items, so that each index ranges from 1 to 5. *Connectivity Habits* comprised Q6–Q10. *Availability Pressure* (independent variable) comprised Q11–Q15, which address expected reply speed, fear of appearing to ignore others, obligation in group chats, displeasure of close ones at slow replies, and pressure for work or college messages after hours. *Psychological Strain* (dependent variable)

comprised Q9 (restlessness or anxiety without the phone), Q18 (replying out of guilt), Q21 (stress, anxiety or fatigue) and Q22 (FoMO), matching the anxiety, guilt, fatigue and FoMO components named in the study's definition. *Voluntary connectivity* was captured by Q16 and Q19 and *obligatory availability* by Q13 and Q18. Q14 (reactions of friends, family or partner) and Q15 (work or college messages) served as indicators of social and professional sources of pressure respectively, Q23 and Q24 as indicators of coping, and Q25 as perceived need for healthier boundaries. Internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951).

6.6 Data analysis

Analyses used Python with SciPy (Virtanen et al., 2020) and statsmodels (Seabold & Perktold, 2010). Frequencies, means and standard deviations described the sample. Since the items are ordinal and the sample is modest, non-parametric procedures were preferred: Spearman's rank correlation, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test for paired comparisons, the Mann–Whitney *U* test and Kruskal–Wallis *H* test for group differences, and chi-square tests for cross-tabulations. Pearson correlation and ordinary least squares regression were added for the central hypothesis. Effect sizes for Wilcoxon and Mann–Whitney tests are reported as $r = Z/\sqrt{N}$, interpreted against Cohen's (1988) conventions. The significance level was .05 and, given the exploratory intent, no formal correction for multiple testing was applied; results with *p* values close to .05 should be regarded as tentative.

6.7 Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained before respondents began the questionnaire. Data are used strictly for academic purposes and reported only in aggregate. Because the online form recorded respondents' email addresses, these were treated as confidential, separated from the response data before analysis and not disclosed. [Add institutional ethics committee approval or exemption details, if applicable.]

7. Results

7.1 Profile of respondents

Table 1 summarises the analytic sample. Nearly two-thirds of respondents were female and over 60% belonged to the youngest band (18–20 years). Three-quarters were students, and Instagram was the platform most used to stay in touch with others (59.7%), ahead of WhatsApp (25.0%). Just over half spent four or more hours daily on their phones.

Table 1. Demographic and usage profile of respondents (*N* = 72)

Characteristic	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Age group	18–20 years	44	61.1
	21–23 years	12	16.7
	24–26 years	8	11.1
	27–29 years	8	11.1
Gender	Female	47	65.3
	Male	25	34.7
Occupation	Student	54	75.0
	Working professional	11	15.3
	Unemployed / other	5	6.9
	Working student	2	2.8
Daily smartphone use	Less than 2 hours	9	12.5
	2–4 hours	23	31.9
	4–6 hours	23	31.9
	More than 6 hours	17	23.6

Characteristic	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Main platform	Instagram	43	59.7
	WhatsApp	18	25.0
	Other social media	9	12.5
	Calls/SMS	2	2.8

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding. The 24–26 and 27–29 bands are small ($n = 8$ each), so age comparisons are made between 18–20 and 21–29 years.

7.2 Descriptive findings

Item-level results are given in Table 2 and Figure 1. Agreement was generally modest and spread across the scale. On the connectivity items, roughly a third of respondents said they check their phone without a notification (36.1%) or reply almost at once (37.5%), while only 15.3% reported restlessness or anxiety without the phone. On the pressure items, agreement ranged from 19.4% (obligation in group chats) to 38.9% (close ones getting upset at slow replies), and larger shares disagreed than agreed on most of them. Two items stood out for their higher endorsement: 55.6% agreed that they feel more relaxed connecting on their own terms ($M = 3.50$), and 51.4% agreed that they need healthier digital boundaries ($M = 3.51$). About half (51.4%) also said the pressure feels different depending on whether it comes from a friend, family member, partner or employer.

Table 2. Item-level descriptive statistics ($N = 72$)

Item	Statement (abridged)	Scale use	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% Dis.	% Agr.
Q6	Checks phone frequently without a notification	Habits	3.17	1.37	23.6	36.1
Q7	Needs to stay logged into at least one app	Habits	2.89	1.40	41.7	36.1
Q8	Responds to messages almost immediately	Habits	3.00	1.31	31.9	37.5
Q9	Restless or anxious without phone for a few hours	Habits / Strain	2.38	1.13	54.2	15.3
Q10	Being online and reachable is unquestioned routine	Habits	2.86	1.26	34.7	27.8
Q11	Others expect quick replies	Pressure	2.83	1.34	41.7	30.6
Q12	Worries of being seen as ignoring others	Pressure	2.72	1.39	44.4	27.8
Q13	Obligated to be available in group chats	Pressure / Obligation	2.50	1.16	51.4	19.4
Q14	Friends, family or partner upset by slow replies	Pressure / Social source	2.82	1.49	40.3	38.9
Q15	Pressure for work/college messages after hours	Pressure / Work source	2.88	1.28	38.9	36.1
Q16	Enjoys constant connection regardless of expectations	Voluntary	2.81	1.23	41.7	27.8
Q17	Stress differs when replying by choice vs. by duty	—	2.89	1.22	38.9	29.2
Q18	Replies out of guilt rather than desire	Obligation / Strain	2.96	1.19	33.3	31.9
Q19	More relaxed connecting on own terms	Voluntary	3.50	1.37	22.2	55.6
Q20	Pressure differs by who it comes from	Source	3.35	1.41	26.4	51.4
Q21	Availability has caused stress, anxiety or fatigue	Strain	2.86	1.35	36.1	31.9
Q22	Experiences FoMO when not checking phone	Strain	2.50	1.30	50.0	25.0

Item	Statement (abridged)	Scale use	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% Dis.	% Agr.
Q23	Has tried setting boundaries	Coping	3.06	1.32	31.9	40.3
Q24	Coping strategies have reduced stress	Coping	2.96	1.24	31.9	31.9
Q25	Needs healthier digital boundaries	Boundaries	3.51	1.37	23.6	51.4

Note. % Dis. = disagree (ratings 1–2); % Agr. = agree (ratings 4–5). Full wording is in the Appendix.

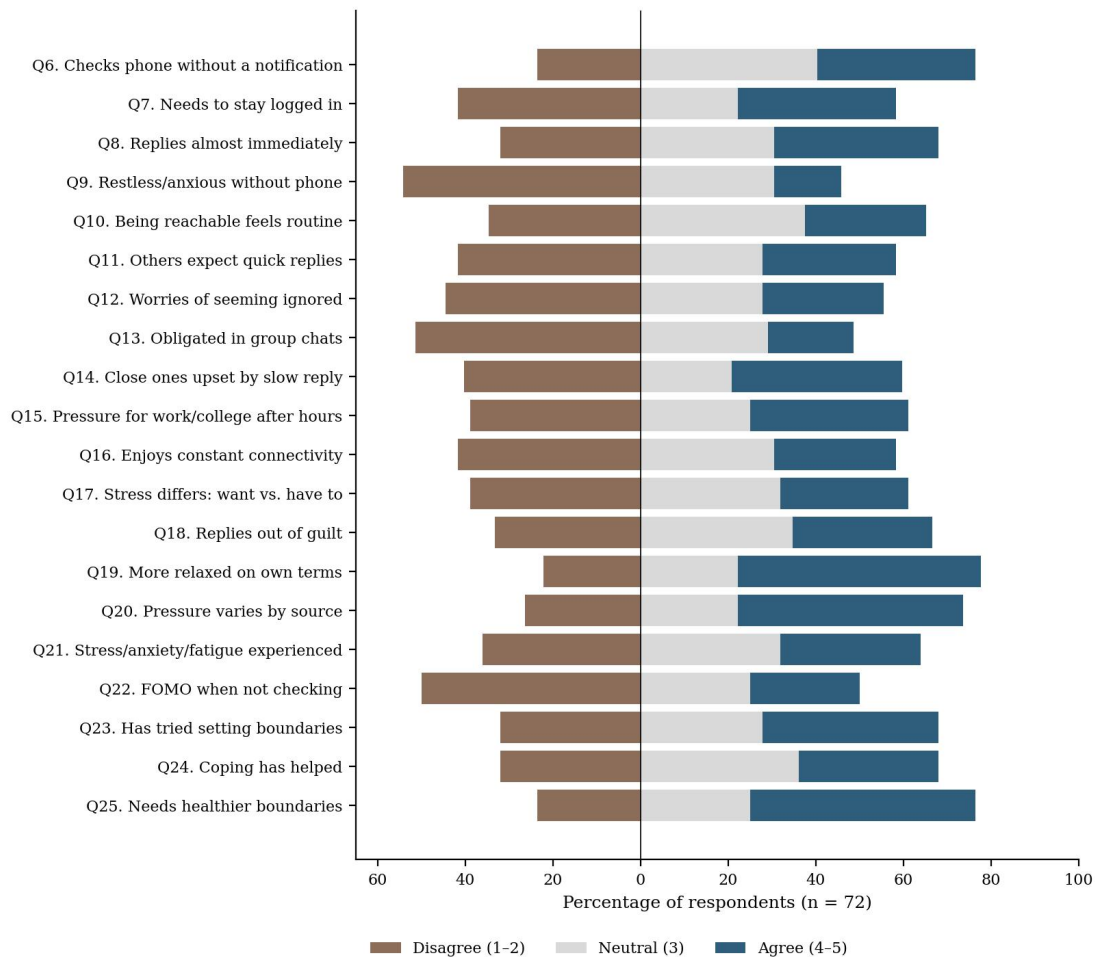


Figure 1. Distribution of responses to the twenty attitude items (disagree, neutral, agree), $N = 72$.

7.3 Reliability and composite indices

Table 3 reports the composite indices. The Connectivity Habits and Availability Pressure indices showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .79$ and $.77$). The four-item Psychological Strain index was weaker ($\alpha = .64$), which is common for short scales that combine different emotional facets, and results involving it should be read with that in mind. Mean scores sat close to the scale midpoint. Half of the respondents (36 of 72) scored 3.0 or higher on Availability Pressure, so the pressure is neither rare nor universal; it is concentrated in about half of the sample.

Table 3. Composite indices and internal consistency

Index	Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's α
Connectivity Habits	Q6–Q10	2.86	0.96	.79
Availability Pressure	Q11–Q15	2.75	0.96	.77
Psychological Strain	Q9, Q18, Q21, Q22	2.67	0.86	.64

Index	Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's <i>α</i>
Voluntary connectivity	Q16, Q19	3.15	1.07	—
Obligatory availability	Q13, Q18	2.73	0.97	—

Note. Alpha is not reported for two-item indices.

7.4 Availability pressure and psychological strain (H1)

Availability Pressure was positively related to Psychological Strain ($r_s = .48, p < .001$; Pearson $r = .49$). A simple regression indicated that each one-point rise in pressure was associated with a 0.44-point rise in strain ($B = 0.44, SE = 0.09, t(70) = 4.68, p < .001$), with pressure accounting for 24% of variance ($R^2 = .24$). Figure 2 displays the relationship. When gender, age band (18–20 vs. 21–29) and daily screen time were entered alongside pressure, the pressure coefficient barely changed ($B = 0.43, SE = 0.10, p < .001$); the model explained 29% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .25, F(4, 67) = 6.93, p < .001$), and none of the covariates was significant at the .05 level (female: $B = 0.37, p = .062$; age 21+: $B = -0.07, p = .713$; screen-time category: $B = -0.10, p = .271$).

Two further checks were made because some items could overlap conceptually across the two indices. First, when the strain index was reduced to the two items Q21 and Q22 and the pressure index to Q11, Q12, Q14 and Q15, the association remained significant although smaller ($r_s = .34, p = .004$). Second, respondents grouped into low (index $\leq 2.4, n = 26$), moderate (2.41–3.2, $n = 23$) and high ($> 3.2, n = 23$) pressure showed mean strain scores of 2.22, 2.80 and 3.05 respectively, a significant difference (Kruskal–Wallis $H(2) = 11.84, p = .003$). H_0 is therefore rejected: availability pressure is meaningfully associated with psychological strain, although the design does not allow a causal reading.

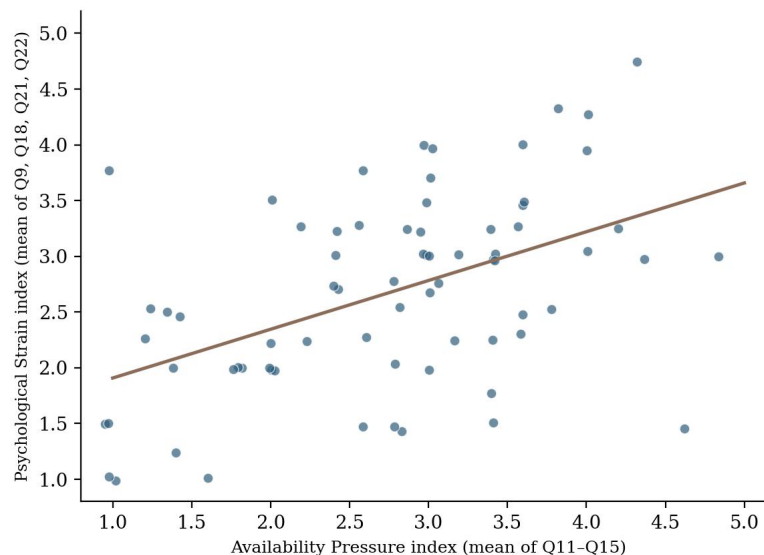


Figure 2. Availability Pressure and Psychological Strain ($N = 72$). Points are slightly jittered for visibility; the line is the ordinary least squares fit.

7.5 Voluntary connectivity versus obligatory availability (H2)

Respondents endorsed the voluntary-connectivity items (Q16, Q19; $M = 3.15$) more than the obligation items (Q13, Q18; $M = 2.73$), a difference that was statistically significant with a small-to-moderate effect (Wilcoxon $Z = 2.47, p = .014, r = .29$). When asked directly whether their stress differs according to whether they reply by choice or by duty (Q17), however, the mean (2.89) did not differ from the neutral midpoint ($p = .49$), and opinions were split (29.2% agreed, 38.9% disagreed).

The comparison of stress levels ran against expectation. Respondents were classified as voluntary-dominant (voluntary score above obligation score; $n = 37$), obligation-dominant ($n = 21$) or balanced ($n = 14$). Voluntary-dominant respondents reported *more* stress, anxiety or fatigue on Q21 than obligation-dominant respondents (means 3.16 and 2.38; Mann–Whitney $p = .040$), while the overall strain index did not differ (2.65 vs. 2.57, $p = .71$). In line with this, enjoyment of constant connection (Q16) correlated positively with strain ($r_s = .41, p < .001$). H_0 is rejected only in a limited sense: voluntary and obligatory orientations differ in endorsement, but the stress difference is small, inconsistent across measures and in the direction opposite to that predicted, so H2 is not convincingly supported.

7.6 Source of pressure (H3)

Pressure from social ties (Q14; $M = 2.82$) and pressure for work or college messages outside normal hours (Q15; $M = 2.88$) did not differ (Wilcoxon $p = .64$), and the two were positively correlated ($r_s = .42, p < .001$), suggesting that respondents who feel one kind of pressure tend to feel the other. H0 is not rejected. Occupation gave a similar picture: students scored somewhat higher than non-students on pressure (2.85 vs. 2.44) and strain (2.78 vs. 2.36), but neither difference reached significance ($p = .167$ and $.084$). Perceived variation in pressure by source (Q20) was fairly common (51.4% agreed) but only marginally above the midpoint ($M = 3.35, p = .070$).

The primary platform did, by contrast, matter for pressure (Kruskal–Wallis $H(3) = 16.78, p < .001$). Instagram users had the highest mean pressure (3.12, $n = 43$) compared with WhatsApp users (2.23, $n = 18$; Mann–Whitney $p < .001$) and users of other social media (1.98, $n = 9$). The Calls/SMS group ($n = 2$) is too small to interpret. Strain did not differ significantly by platform ($p = .176$).

7.7 Coping and boundaries (H4)

Forty per cent of respondents (40.3%) agreed that they had tried setting boundaries such as muting notifications or delaying replies, and 31.9% agreed that their coping strategies had reduced their stress. Contrary to H4, coping was linked with *higher* rather than lower strain. Those who had tried boundaries ($n = 29$) had higher strain than those who had not ($n = 23$; 2.98 vs. 2.17; $p = .003$) and reported more stress on Q21 (3.45 vs. 2.04; $p < .001$). Trying boundaries (Q23) and rating coping as helpful (Q24) correlated positively with strain ($r_s = .34, p = .003$ and $r_s = .41, p < .001$), while Q24 was unrelated to pressure ($r_s = .10, p = .40$). Among the 29 who had tried boundaries, about half (48.3%) said coping had helped, and the rating was unrelated to their strain scores ($r_s = .09, p = .64$).

Interest in change was nonetheless widespread. Just over half (51.4%) wished for healthier digital boundaries, and this wish was much stronger among those who had already tried them (mean 4.34 vs. 2.95) and correlated with strain ($r_s = .41, p < .001$) but not with pressure ($r_s = .12, p = .34$). H0 is not rejected, and H4 is not supported in the predicted direction.

7.8 Demographic and usage comparisons

Table 4 compares pressure and strain across demographic and usage groups, and Table 5 summarises the hypothesis tests. Women scored higher than men on strain (2.85 vs. 2.35; $U = 785, p = .019, r \approx .28$) and on connectivity habits (3.05 vs. 2.50, $p = .024$), whereas the gender difference in pressure was not significant ($p = .200$). Chi-square tests of high versus lower pressure (index ≥ 3 vs. < 3) found no association with gender ($\chi^2(1) = 1.53, p = .216$) or age band ($\chi^2(1) = 0.23, p = .629$). Daily screen time was not significantly related to pressure ($r_s = .17, p = .152$) or strain ($r_s = .01, p = .964$), which supports the study's premise that availability pressure is not simply a function of hours on the phone. Connectivity habits, on the other hand, were moderately associated with both pressure ($r_s = .33, p = .005$) and strain ($r_s = .57, p < .001$). Given the number of comparisons and the small cells, the gender finding in particular is tentative.

Table 4. Availability Pressure and Psychological Strain by group (means)

Grouping	Group (n)	Pressure	Strain	Test (p)
Gender	Female (47)	2.86	2.85	Pressure .200; Strain .019
	Male (25)	2.54	2.35	
Age band	18–20 (44)	2.85	2.76	Pressure .498; Strain .368
	21–29 (28)	2.60	2.54	
Occupation	Student (54)	2.85	2.78	Pressure .167; Strain .084
	Other (18)	2.44	2.36	
Daily phone use	< 2 hours (9)	2.13	2.47	Pressure .149; Strain .895
	2–4 hours (23)	2.87	2.78	
	4–6 hours (23)	2.65	2.67	
	> 6 hours (17)	3.05	2.63	
Main platform	Instagram (43)	3.12	2.84	Pressure < .001; Strain .176

Grouping	Group (n)	Pressure	Strain	Test (p)
	WhatsApp (18)	2.23	2.50	
	Other social (9)	1.98	2.42	
	Calls/SMS (2)	2.90	1.75	

Note. Two-group comparisons use the Mann–Whitney *U* test; multi-group comparisons use the Kruskal–Wallis test. The Calls/SMS group is too small to interpret.

Table 5. Summary of hypothesis tests

Hyp.	Main test(s)	Key result	Decision
H1	Spearman and Pearson correlation; OLS regression; Kruskal–Wallis	$rs = .48, p < .001; B = 0.44; R^2 = .24$	H0 rejected; supported
H2	Wilcoxon (voluntary vs. obligation; Q17); Mann–Whitney (Q21)	$p = .014 (r = .29); Q17 p = .49; Q21 p = .040$, opposite direction	Partly supported; unexpected direction
H3	Wilcoxon (Q14 vs. Q15)	$p = .64$	H0 not rejected
H4	Spearman; Mann–Whitney	Coping positively related to strain ($rs = .34$ to $.41$)	Not supported as predicted

Note. All tests two-tailed, $\alpha = .05, N = 72$. No correction for multiple comparisons was applied.

8. Discussion

The clearest result is that perceived pressure to stay available tracks psychological strain, and does so independently of how long people spend on their phones. Screen time showed no meaningful link with either pressure or strain, while the sense of being expected to respond did. This supports the central argument of the study, namely that the felt expectation to be reachable is a different construct from usage volume and is worth measuring separately. It is also consistent with the workplace finding that telepressure is tied to recovery rather than to sheer hours of communication (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015), and with evidence that guilt and pressure to respond are associated with poorer relational outcomes in close friendships (Hall & Baym, 2012).

The picture is less tidy than the study's title implies. Average pressure was moderate, roughly half the sample scored at or above the midpoint, and more respondents disagreed than agreed with most pressure statements. The pressure appears real for a sizeable subset rather than universal. At the same time, a majority preferred connecting on their own terms and wanted healthier boundaries, which suggests that the discomfort is more widespread than the pressure scores alone reveal.

The voluntary-versus-obligatory contrast produced an instructive surprise. Respondents endorsed voluntary connectivity more than obligation, yet those leaning towards voluntary connectivity did not report less stress, and enjoyment of constant connection correlated positively with strain. A self-determination reading (Ryan & Deci, 2000) would predict lower strain among autonomously motivated users, so this result deserves careful interpretation. A plausible explanation is that enjoyment and strain coexist: people who value being connected are also those most exposed to its demands, and the two questions may be tapping engagement more than autonomy. This is an interpretation, not something the present data can test, and the single-item and two-item measures used here are too coarse to separate autonomous from controlled motivation.

The finding that pressure did not differ between social and work or college sources, but was higher among Instagram users than WhatsApp users, invites a platform-level explanation. Visible cues such as “seen” markers and activity status can make lapses in responsiveness conspicuous (Mai et al., 2015), and image-based social platforms may also encourage constant checking for FoMO-related reasons (Przybylski et al., 2013). Because platform choice was self-selected and the study did not measure specific interface features, this remains a hypothesis for future work. The positive correlation between social and work-related pressure additionally suggests that pressure behaves like a general disposition or environment rather than a context-specific reaction, in line with the argument that the costs of staying connected follow people across social settings (Barber & Santuzzi, 2017).

The coping results should not be read as evidence that boundary-setting harms wellbeing. Respondents who were already stressed were the ones most likely to have tried boundaries and to be in a position to judge whether they helped, whereas those with little strain had little to cope with. Cross-sectional data of this kind cannot separate cause from reaction, and the pattern is what one would expect if coping is largely reactive. The absence of any relationship between perceived coping success and pressure, and among those who had tried boundaries between success and strain, does however suggest that the informal strategies currently used, such as muting notifications or delaying replies, are not experienced as reliably effective. Experimental work on message checking offers a more hopeful indication that structural changes to habits can lower stress (Kushlev & Dunn, 2015).

9. Implications

For higher-education institutions and employers, the results argue for explicit communication norms, including clear expectations about response times and out-of-hours messaging, because the pressure attaches to the expectation rather than to usage as such. For young adults and those who counsel them, digital-wellbeing guidance that concentrates only on reducing screen time may miss the main issue; helping people negotiate reply expectations with friends, family and colleagues may prove more relevant. For platform designers, the finding that pressure is greatest on the platform with strong visibility cues supports giving users more control over read receipts and activity indicators. For researchers, the study shows that a short availability-pressure measure can be paired with wellbeing indicators in future validated instruments.

10. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, convenience sampling limits generalisation, and the achieved sample fell short of the planned 120 respondents and was heavily weighted towards women (65%) and to those aged 18–20 (61%), with only eight respondents in each of the two oldest bands. Second, the analytic sample was reduced from 84 to 72 by removing repeat and non-differentiated responses; although the main result held in the full data, other estimates may shift. Third, the data are cross-sectional and self-reported, so direction of influence cannot be established and responses may reflect social desirability. Fourth, the instrument was researcher-designed and not previously validated; several constructs, notably the source of pressure and coping, rest on one or two items, and the strain index had modest reliability ($\alpha = .64$). Fifth, some strain and pressure items are conceptually adjacent, which may inflate their association, although the sensitivity analysis using non-overlapping items retained a significant relationship. Sixth, many tests were run without correction, so isolated results such as the gender difference should be treated cautiously.

Future studies could use larger and more balanced samples, validated scales such as those for telepressure and online vigilance, and longitudinal or experience-sampling designs that follow how pressure and mood change from day to day. Qualitative interviews would help explain how young adults justify, resist and cope with availability expectations, which a structured questionnaire can only approximate. Comparing platforms directly, and separating enjoyment from obligation with fuller multi-item measures, would also clarify the unexpected voluntary-connectivity result reported here.

11. Conclusion

This study set out to look beneath the ordinary habit of replying to messages and to ask when staying connected stops being a wish and becomes a demand. In this sample of young adults, the felt expectation of constant availability was moderate on average but was clearly associated with greater psychological strain, independently of gender, age band and time spent on the phone. Enjoyment of connectivity and strain appeared side by side, pressure was similar across social and work contexts but stronger among Instagram users, and current coping efforts were not linked with relief. Although the findings are exploratory and limited by the sample, they support treating availability pressure as a separate, measurable stressor and offer a starting point for more rigorous research on the hidden cost of being always reachable.

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