

Negative Effects of Social Media use on the Mental Health

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Abstract— The intent of this paper is to explore the relationship between social media use and mental health in the young adult population. Current research indicates that there is a connection between increased social media use and deteriorated mental health. Unfortunately, young adults, the most active social media users, have a predominantly high risk for developing mental health issues, making this connection particularly concerning. At present, it is unclear how social media and mental health are connected; therefore this thesis explores the individual and social theories that may give reason for this connection. Theories that are discussed include: the impact of sedentary behaviors on mental health, displaced behavior, and sleep interruption due to blue light exposure, social media's effects on romantic relationships, and social media's effects on platonic relationships.

Key words: Social Networking, Mental Health, Impact of Social Networks

I. INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing concern over the past couple of decades regarding the link between social media use and mental health issues. Although research findings identify a connection between increased social media use in the young adult population and increased mental health problems in the same population, it is unclear how social media use may be associated with these changes. The purpose of this thesis is to explore how social media use is related to the mental health of young adults. To accomplish this goal, the researcher reviews and synthesizes the existing literature pertaining to characteristics of social media, general young adult mental health, and the current social- and individual-level theories that may help explain the relationship between social media use by young adults and their mental health.

II. EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE: CURRENT RESEARCH AND SPECULATIONS

Numerous studies identify connections between social media use and negative outcomes such as increased depression, anxiety, compulsive behavior, loneliness, and narcissism. The burgeoning use of social media by young adults raises concerns about these possible negative effects of its use. If social media use can be linked to negative outcomes, researchers need to devote more attention to understanding factors associated with negative mental health outcomes and how to assuage these outcomes. The idea that Internet use may have a negative effect on one's wellbeing is not new. In 1995, The HomeNet Project provided Internet access and a computer to 93 households that had no previous Internet experience and tracked their psychological health over several years. After the initial year of Internet use the researchers concluded that greater use of the Internet was associated with more signs of loneliness and depression. In 2012, Rosen, Cheever, and Carrier coined the term "iDisorder," defined as the negative relationship between

technology usage and psychological health. More recently, researchers have turned towards social media, seeking to determine if it has deleterious effects on mental health.

III. SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEPRESSION

A study found that time spent on Facebook by high school students was positively correlated with depression. These findings were mirrored by an organization who found that participants who spent more time online and those who performed more Facebook image management evidenced more clinical symptoms of major depression. A study of American university students found that more intense Facebook use predicted increased loneliness. Also, according to a study college students who reported having higher numbers of Facebook friends experienced lower emotional adjustment to college life. Further, the same study found that college students who spent more time on Facebook reported having lower self-esteem than those who spent less time. A study explored the idea that the quality of social media interactions was a better predictor of mental wellness than general social media use. They found that adolescents who reported low friendship quality and high frequencies of social use of online media (talking to friends, messaging, etc) at Time 1 were less likely to be depressed at Time 2. Conversely, those with low friendship quality who used social media primarily for passive use at Time 1 were more likely to be depressed and socially anxious at Time 2. Davila (2012) also explored this idea: In examining the social networking behaviors of 334 undergraduate students, he found that more negative and less positive interactions on social networking sites were associated with greater depressive symptoms.

IV. SOCIAL MEDIA AND ANXIETY

There are also several studies linking social media to anxiety and compulsive behavior. A recent research study found that 45% of British adults indicated they feel worried or uncomfortable when they cannot access their email or social network sites (Anxiety UK, 2012). Rosen et al. (2013) found that younger generations (particularly the iGeneration and Net Generation) are checking in very often (defined as every hour, every 15 minutes, or all the time) with their messages and social networks. Also, younger generations were scored as consistently more anxious than older generations when they were unable to check their social networks and texts. A new medical term has been created out of this constant connectivity: Phantom vibration syndrome, defined as perceived vibration from a cell phone that is not vibrating, has been reported to occur with large numbers of people (Drouin et al., 2012; Rothberg et al., 2010).

V. YOUNG ADULTS: A POPULATION AT RISK?

Coupled with the idea that young adults are such avid users of social media, it is alarming to realize that the young adult

population is particularly prone to experiencing mental illness. According to studies done young adults are defined as being aged 18 to 29 years. It is well evidenced that young adults experience severe mental health issues compared to the rest of the population: studies state that one in four young adults experience a depressive state between 18 and 24 years of age. It is also believed that most major psychiatric problems develop during early adulthood. What is even more shocking is that the number of cases is on the rise.

VI. EFFECTS OF YOUNG ADULT MENTAL HEALTH ON LIFELONG HEALTH

Early onset of psychiatric problems is concerning because it predicts a more severe, chronic, and recurrent form of the issue. For example, individuals with Major Depressive Disorder in young adulthood spend an average of a decade of their lives with the illness. Besides heightening the likelihood of lifelong illness, young adult mental health issues also affect brain development and function. Early onset depression (age 17-23) is linked to abnormal brain development, resulting in a reduced volume of the prefrontal cortex. In addition, study noted that mental illness at the critical period of emerging adulthood can lead to lifelong disability by eroding the individual's ability to develop socially, occupationally, and educationally. The mental health risks faced by young adults point to the importance of examining variables that could contribute to these mental health concerns.

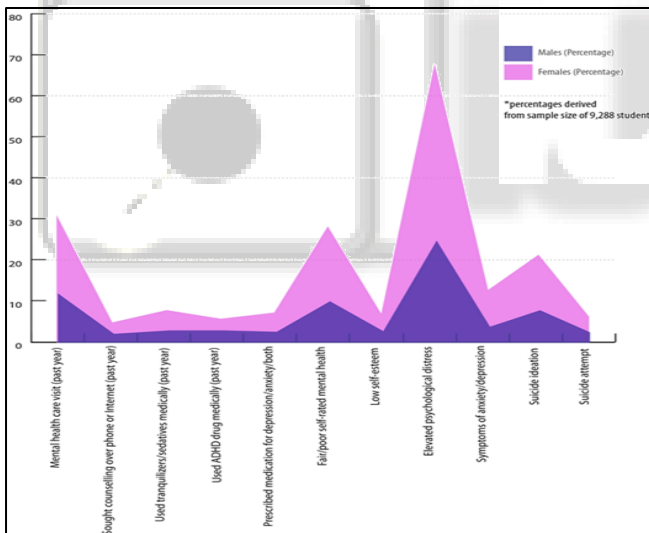


Fig. 1: Chart Male Female Mental Health

VII. HOW SOCIAL MEDIA USE AFFECTS SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

According to Sherry Turkle (2012), social media is so seductive because it allows for the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Certainly, social media has had a profound effect on how people interact with their social networks. But how? How does social media affect the quality and positive mental health effects of social relationships? There are many avenues through which social media may be affecting how young adults interact with their social networks. In this section, the researcher will discuss several: how social media use affects relationship privacy, constant connectivity and fear of missing out, and social comparison. One way that social media is changing how

young adults interact with their networks of relationships is by changing the privacy of these relationships. The relationships people have with others on Facebook are visible to many, often resulting in a loss of privacy within personal relationships. Although being able to keep up with information about a friend's life via social media may be viewed as a way to remain close, this lack of privacy may actually backfire. It has been shown that monitoring others' activities on social media can lead to negative relationship outcomes such as online and offline relational intrusion. According to David Schwartz, Oakland University Counselling Center director, social media can be problematic because it can create and exacerbate relationship problems that would be better handled off-line. "The difficult thing is that it's hard to express yourself the same way you would in person. Often times, things can get misrepresented or misconstrued by the person who is reading it when it's been posted, which can cause relationship problems, too... (You see online) a lot of the same problems you see outside of social media, but they tend to get magnified more or exacerbated because of it, and can be a breeding ground for some unhealthy communication styles" (p. A1). He's seen many situations where social media has magnified problems, including stress from defriending and blocking, or students catching their significant other cheating online. Bullying also occurs another social phenomena being exacerbated by social media is what researchers are calling a fear of missing out. This refers to the blend of anxiety, inadequacy and irritation that can flare up while skimming social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Billions of Twitter messages, status updates and photographs provide thrilling glimpses of the daily lives and activities of friends, co-workers, and peers noted that the fear of missing out on something or someone more interesting, exciting or better than what we're currently doing is so strong that teens and adults text while driving, because the possibility of a 29 social connection is more important to them than their own safety. According to study, the worry that the fear of missing out signals in the mind is set off by the fear of regret. He says people have become afraid that they've made the wrong decision about how to spend our time. Fear of missing out is not new. It has been induced throughout history by such triggers as newspaper society pages, party pictures, and annual holiday letters depicting people at their festive best. But now, instead of receiving occasional polite updates, we get reminders around the clock, mainlined via the device of our choosing (Wo. However, not all of this information is necessarily desired: according to study, this fear of missing out translates very quickly into social comparison with one's friends via social media. "Facebook users are often exposed to details about their peers' lives that were not actively sought out. This exposure to other people's social activities can lead to users' comparing their own social lives with that of their peers, and subsequently, may have harmful effects. For example, a college student might scroll through her Instagram feed and see pictures her friends have posted of the delicious foods they ate, fun trips they went on, and new shoes they bought – without her. These pictures may lead her to socially compare herself to others and ask questions such as: 'Is my life as exciting as my friends' lives? Am I happy with the way my life is? Why didn't they invite me?'" (p. 2). Although researchers have expressed concern about the potential

effects of these types of questions on an individual's self-esteem and mental health, little empirical evidence has tested this issue directly. 30 This fear of missing out impacts young adults by changing how they view their social relationships. First, this fear exacerbates constant connectivity and makes it difficult for young adults to step away from compulsively checking their devices. They are afraid of what they might miss if they disconnect. Fear of missing out also keeps people from being able to relax and be contented with their particular circumstance, because they are bombarded with the interesting activities of their friends. Fear of missing out can also foster a feeling of victimization and exclusion in young adults: through social media, young adults can clearly see if their friends are hanging out without them. The act of social comparison also poses a threat to young adult social media users. Use of the Internet and social media has been linked in a handful of studies to increased social comparison and diminished self-esteem and self-image. Investigated the effects of online social media profiles in two studies. The first study found that participants had a more negative body image after being shown profile pictures of physically attractive individuals than those who had been shown profile pictures of less physically attractive individuals. The second study found that male participants who were shown profiles of more successful men reported a higher perceived divergence between their current career status and their ideal career status when compared with male participants who were shown profiles of less successful individuals. They collected survey data from undergraduates with questions about their Facebook use. Their findings indicated that individuals who had been using Facebook for a longer period of time perceived that others were happier and that life was not fair. Participants who spent more time on Facebook weekly reported that they felt others were happier and had better lives. It showed a direct link between Facebook use per day and level of 31 social comparison: individuals who used Facebook more daily tended to make more social comparisons. Zuo also found that making social comparisons was associated with lower self-esteem and more negative health outcomes and that Facebook use is predictive of lower self-esteem and more negative mental health outcomes. It seems that people cannot help but compare themselves to those around them; this practice can have particularly deleterious effects in a social media climate, where other people can censor their profiles to only show a "highlight reel" of their life. If a person has a full view of their own life, but only sees others' highlights, this social comparison can be understandably discouraging.

VIII. HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTS MENTAL HEALTH: THEORIES

The literature review up to this point demonstrates that young adults operate at a vulnerable precipice: as a population, young adults are at a high risk of developing mental health problems as they experience emerging adulthood. These same young adults are the most active users of social media, which has a distinct connection with mental health problems. This precarious situation demands more understanding: knowing that social media and mental health are related is merely a jumping off point. Understanding how and why social media might be affecting young adult mental health is the next step to illuminating the connections at play between

young adults, their environments, their health, and the role of social media. A number of theories that may help explain why social media shows a connection to mental health will now be discussed. Although many of these theories offer an intriguing perspective on how social media could be affecting mental health in the young adult population, none of them provide definitive proof that social media use causes a decline in mental health. The purpose of this discussion is to explore the possible causes of the connection between social media and mental health. The discussion of theoretical perspectives is divided into two sections: individual theories and social theories. Individual theories seek to account for how social media affects people due to individual behaviours and personality traits, ignoring social media's effects on the person's social relationships. The second set of theories can be classified as social theories, or theories. That look at how social media use affects people as they relate to each other and their larger environment. These two theoretical perspectives are not mutually exclusive; it is likely that a combination of these theories impact the relationship between mental health and social media use in young adults.

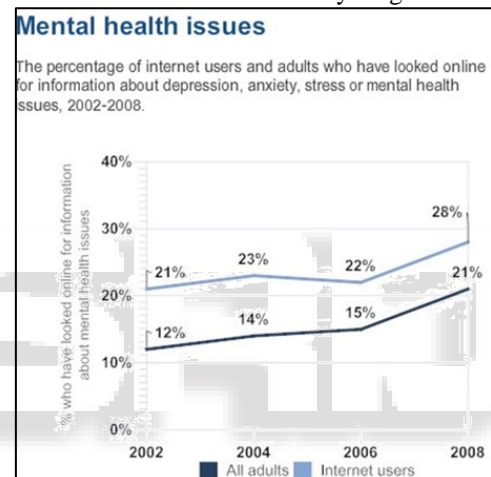


Fig. 2: Mental Health Issues

IX. CONCLUSION

This review of the research on the connection between social media use and degraded mental health demonstrates the importance of the topic: the potential harmful effects surrounding social media use have profound consequences for young adults. As previously noted, the mental health problems developed in young adulthood can plague a person throughout their lifespan. The importance of continued research and exploration on this topic cannot be overstated. The theories reviewed in the previous section offer explanatory value in the relationship between social media and mental health. By focusing on several individual- and social- level theories, this thesis was able to illuminate how complex this relationship is. The theories discussed seem to offer insight into the complex connections between social media use and mental health, implying that several of the social and individual theories discussed may play a role in creating the connection between young adult mental health and social media use. It is important to note that this thesis could not cover every theory that could explain how social media use connects to mental health. For example, there is a growing body of research on the topic of cyber bullying and the effects this activity has on the self-image of young people.

Given that young adults tend to be highly influenced by peers, this online bullying could have an effect on mental health. Similarly, the body image of young people, particularly girls and young women, seems to be affected through consumption of online media. The shortcoming of this thesis, and the current research at large, lies in the inability to examine all factors that may contribute to the relationship between social media use and mental health simultaneously. Social media research is a relatively new topic; most of the existing literature is exploratory. Given the complex nature of this relationship, it is challenging to address the connection thoroughly while controlling for confounding variables. It is important to note that causality has not been proven, and that many of the topics and theories presented in this thesis are merely potential explanations for an observed connection.

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