

Sample Paper

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Sociology 210-Fall 2017

Social Media's Impact on Young Adults' Mental Health

Social Media's Impact on Young Adults' Mental Health

During 2016, in the United States, nearly 90% of emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 29 used social media, and they visited more than two sites on average every day. Social media refers to internet applications that allow users to exchange content with others. Young adults in 2016 most commonly used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Snapchat as social media sites (Scott et al. 2017:311). Online social networking gives young adults endless opportunities to connect with others online, and it also helps them plan their daily activities. The constant insight into other peoples' lives and the exposure of ones' own life brings positive and negative outcomes, especially regarding mental health. A person's mental health refers to their overall psychological well-being, including their prevention and treatment of diagnosed mental illnesses (Falissard et al. 2017:1152). By examining the reported emotions and ideas of young adults from ages 19-32, researchers have discovered ways in which social media impacts mental health. Although the use of social media among young adults in America often enhances social support, it also leads to cyberbullying, lower levels of self-esteem, and higher levels of anxiety, depression, self-objectification, and social comparison.

Focusing on a positive implication from social media use, Facebook often provides an affirmation of social support and a positive outlet for self-disclosure among young adults. Researchers Kim Junghyun and Jong-Eun Roselyn Lee conducted a research project in the form of a survey, studying 391 students' number of Facebook friends, their honest or positive self-presentation, perceived social support, and their subjective well-being (2011). By using a variety of scales to measure self-reported levels of emotions, the researchers found that positive self-presentation online directly caused high levels of emotional well-being. Positive self-presentation refers to online posts that only portray a positive insight into a person's life. On the

contrary, honest self-presentation online includes realistic posts that are often negative or neutral toned. The data from the survey suggest that honest self-presentation online contributes to social support, and this social support later leads to positive reports of well-being (Kim and Lee 2011:360). Although the results of the survey show that social media sites may constructively influence mental health, other studies demonstrate negative impressions, such as increased anxiety.

Individuals with anxiety disorders experience severe symptoms that influence their daily life, and although these disorders affect the United States as a whole, they impact young adults the most frequent. Anxiety disorders collectively impact the United States, shown by the fact that the United States spends 42 to 47 billion dollars annually on diagnosing and treating anxiety problems. Additionally, in comparison to all other psychological disorders, anxiety problems represent the second leading cause of disability in the United States. Emerging adults make up the majority of people with anxiety problems, and in relation to other age groups, people in the young adult category face the highest risk of developing an anxiety disorder (Vannucci et al. 2017:162). Those diagnosed with an anxiety disorder tend to suffer psychologically, socially, and even physically. For example, these disorders may cause a person to struggle with daily social activities, and they can impact a person's ability to work efficiently in an occupation setting (Vannucci et al. 2017:163). Although there are different kinds of anxiety disorders, people that struggle with anxiety problems generally suffer from continuous states of fear and obsessive worrying. Some disorders may cause more serious symptoms such as fatigue, restlessness, poor concentration, and nausea (Torpy 2011:522). Although countless factors lead to the development of an anxiety problems, social media contributes to these disorders.

Young adults' online networking can lead to increased feelings of anxiety, and consistent anxious feelings contribute to the development of an anxiety disorder. Anna Vannucci, Kaitlin M. Flannery, and Christine McCauley conducted an online survey of a nationally representative group of 18 to 22 year old participants and examined the association between their quantities of social media use and reported feelings of anxiety (Vannucci et al. 2017:162). To measure participants' online networking use, the researchers used The Technology Use Questionnaire, a survey that categorized social media into six groups, ranging from zero to four hours a day. The data collected suggests that a high amount of daily social media use corresponds to higher levels of anxiety symptoms. Vannucci and colleagues explain that online networking has the potential to create stress and may enhance self-reflecting negative thoughts (2017). As a consequence of the increased symptoms of anxiety, the researchers also explain that experiencing large amounts of consistent anxiety can increase a person's chance of developing an anxiety disorder (Vannucci et al. 2017:162). In addition to anxiety disorders, young adults are also at high risk for developing depressive disorders (Lin et al. 2016).

Similar to anxiety disorders, depression impacts the nation as a whole, but it notably induces power over emerging adults by changing their daily life and long-term abilities. Looking at the national impact, the amount of reduced worker productivity and increased medical expenses to treat and diagnose depressive disorders cost the United States 83 billion on average every year (Lin et al. 2016:323). Depression most commonly starts in young adulthood, showing their vulnerability to developing a disorder. When compared to all other mental illnesses, depressive disorders make up the most amount of years of life that people need to change aspects of their life due to their mental health. For example, people with depressive disorders tend to have a persistently depressed mood along with a decline in interest in

previously enjoyed activities, and person's decrease of interest in activities serves as a way that their mental illness adjusted their life (Lin et al. 2016:322). Although feeling depressed differentiates from the diagnosis of a depressive illness, consistently feeling sad or depressed is one of the first symptoms of a disorder (Culpepper et al. 2015). Both the feeling of depression and diagnosed depressive disorders contribute to a person's mental health, and social media influences the reported levels of depression among young adults.

As previously shown, depressive disorders leave a large impact on young adults and the United States overall, and social media contributes to depressive feelings in young adults. Lin et al. surveyed a nationally representative group of young adults in the United States between the ages 19 and 32 regarding their social media use and their reported extent of depressive moods (2016). The project selected participants through random digit dialing and address-based sampling, and the survey met a sampling frame of more than 97% of the United States population (Lin et al. 2016:323). Through the online survey, the participants used the Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurements Information System (PROMIS), a tool of the National Institute of Health that uses questions to measure different levels of physical and mental health. The questionnaire asked participants about their experience with depression and general sadness over the past seven days. Data showed that the group with the highest quantities of reported depressive feelings also had the most visits on social media per week, and the people in the medium and high ranking groups spent more time daily on social media than those in the low category. The collected feedback from the PROMIS suggest a positive correlation between social media and young adults' feelings of depression (Lin et al. 2016). Online activity not only sways feelings of sadness, but it shapes the view that young adults project on themselves.

Social media also influences young adults' reflection on themselves, including self-objectification. A scholarly article published in the academic journal, *Cyberpsychology, Behavior & Social Networking*, examines the association between Facebook, mental health, and self-esteem among 1,104 undergraduate participants at a university (Hanna et al. 2013:173). Students completed a survey about the quantity of their daily Facebook usage and their concern with their physical appearance. Data collected from the study concluded that high Facebook use increased self-objectification by nearly 50% in men and 45% in women. When a person self-objectifies, they view themselves as an object and not as a human-being with other non-physical qualities. By consistently looking at social media site such as Facebook, users see pictures of other people, and in return they compare their own physical presentation to their Facebook friends' appearance. Hanna et al. conclude that self-objectification diminishes their overall mental well-being (Hannah et al. 2013:172). Besides from self-objectification, social media users compare themselves to other people through social comparison.

Aside from social media's contribution to a person's physical judgment about their own appearance, it also leads to their overall social comparison to other people. Hanna et al. also discuss the connection between Facebook use and social comparison in their survey about undergraduate students (2013). When people learn information about others, they often relate the information back to themselves, and Hanna et al. call this connection social comparison. The scholars uncovered through data in the survey that social media use increased social comparison by 46% in men and 32% in women. When Facebook users view a constant stream of detailed information about acquaintances or friends online, they compare their own life to the lives that they see on the screen. Upward social comparison, or relating oneself to others with more favorable characteristics, especially increases negative self-evaluations. These negative

comparisons occur because Facebook users tend to only post their positive life changes and display themselves happier than how they honestly feel (Hanna et al. 2013:172). Social comparison often leads to negative levels of self-esteem, which also contributes a person's mental health.

Online networking often lowers overall self-esteem in emerging adults, and self-esteem refers to peoples' confidence in their own abilities and the respect that they hold for themselves. Aside from discussing social comparison and self-objectification, Hanna et al. found through feedback in their survey that Facebook can lower the general self-esteem of its users (2013). In the survey of undergraduate students, the participants with the highest amounts of Facebook use in comparison to those with the lowest amounts produced 18% lower self-esteem in women and 30% lower in men. In the survey, the scholars noted that many factors build a person's self-esteem, but the constant comparison individuals experience by viewing other peoples' lives online often lowers their own self-esteem (Hanna et al. 2013:174). In addition to lower levels of self-esteem, the same social networking sites also provide access to an online activity that hurts psychological health.

Online media sites give young adults an opportunity to cyberbully, and this online bullying harms young adults' mental health. Cyberbullying, a type of bullying that occurs through electronic devices, has significant consequences, such as emotional distress (Lee 2015:456). Mary E. Varghese and Carole M. Pistole used an online survey at a large mid-western university to conduct a report on the number of cyberbullies, cyberbullying victims, and both of their levels of depression and loneliness (Varghese and Pistole 2017). The university's registrar office sent out an email to a random sample of students, and 338 students completed the survey. In the study, Varghese and Pistole found that 15.1% of the participants reported being

cyberbully victims, and 8.0% reported cyberbullying (2017). Although the project collected a small sample size of students, the authors state that their findings correlated with other published data regarding the number of cyberbullies and victims among college students. By analyzing the answers from the survey, the researchers found that cyberbully victims in comparison to non-victims reported higher levels of depression and loneliness (Varghese and Pistole 2017:9). Overall, social media contributes to the existence of cyberbullying, and survey responses show that cyberbully victims often experience poor mental health.

This paper addresses many of the consequences on mental health from social media on young adults, but it does not discuss the implications on other age groups, those with previously diagnosed mental illnesses, or people with specific backgrounds. Online networking may affect youth or older adults differently from emerging adults, but this paper only discusses data from adults ranging from 18 to 32 year olds. Additionally, this research does not examine the influence of social media on those diagnosed explicitly with pre-existing mental illnesses and how social media may change their treatment process. This research suggests how activity online may lead to the development of depressive or anxiety disorders, but not the impact on only those already diagnosed. Lastly, the research broadly focuses on the United States as a whole, but does not narrow down on how online networking may impact those with certain characteristics, such as race, ethnic background, or socioeconomic status. Conclusively, additional exploration could answer how social media affects others in different age groups, with preexisting mental illnesses, and with specific backgrounds.

Although online networking leads to young adults receiving social support from their friends and acquaintances online, it impacts their mental health in many negative ways. Anxiety disorders often develop from increased feelings of anxiety, and high amounts of time spent on

social media correlates with high levels of anxious feelings in young adults (Vannucci et al. 2017). Similarly, high amounts spent on social media among emerging adults relates to feelings of depression (Lin et al. 2016). Regarding how young adults view themselves, overall self-esteem decreases with large quantities of online networking, and their self-objectification and social comparison increase with high usage (Hanna et al. 2013). In terms of cyberbullying, when individuals experience online harassment, it lowers their self-esteem, and it increases their feelings of loneliness and sadness (Varghese and Pistole 2017). Social media gives young adults countless opportunities to share updates about their life and connect with others, but unfortunately, research suggests that young adults' constant online presence could produce negative mental health outcomes.

References

- Culpepper, Larry, Philip R. Muskin, and Stephen M. Stahl. 2015. "Major Depressive Disorder: Understanding the Significance of Residual Symptoms and Balancing Efficacy with Tolerability". *The American Journal of Medicine* 128(9)1-15.
- Falissard, Bruno Marlène Monégat, and Gordon Harper. 2017. "Psychiatry, mental health, mental disability: time for some necessary clarifications". *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 26:1151-1154.
- Hanna, Emily, Monique L. Ward, Morgan Jerald, Rita C. Seabrook, Lauren Reed, Soraya Giaccardi, and Julia R. Lippman. 2013. "Contributions of Social Comparison and Self-Objectification in Mediating Associations Between Facebook Use and Emergent Adults' Psychological Well-Being." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior & Social Networking* 20(3): 172-179.
- Lee, Jungup, Neill Abell, and Jennifer Holmes. 2015. "Validation of Measures of Cyberbullying Perpetration and Victimization in Emerging Adulthood". *Research on Social Work Practice* 27(4):456-467.
- Liu, Lin Y., Colditz, Jason B., Leila M. Giles, Beth L. Hoffman, Elizabeth Miller, Brian A. Primack, Ana Radovic, Ariel Shensa, and Jamie E. Sidani. 2016. "Association Between Social Media Use and Depression Among U.S. Young Adults." *Depression & Anxiety* 33(4):323-331.
- Kim, Junghyun, and Jong-Eun Roselyn Lee. 2011. "The Facebook Paths to Happiness: Effects of the Number of Facebook Friends and Self-Presentation on Subjective Well-Being". *Cyber Psychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 14(6):359-364.
- Torpy, Janet M., Alison E. Burke, and Robert M. Golub. 2011. "Generalized Anxiety Disorder".

The Journal of the American Medical Association 305(5):522.

Scott, Carol F, Bay-Cheng, Laina Y, Mark A. Prince, Thomas H. Nochajski, Collins, R.

Lorraine. 2017. "Time spent online: Latent profile analyses of emerging adults' social media use". *Computers in Human Behavior* 75:311-319.

Vannucci, Anna, Kaitlin M. Flannery, and Christine McCauley Ohannessian. 2017. "Social media use and anxiety in emerging adults". *Journal of Affective Disorders* 2017:163-166.

Varghese, Mary E., and Carole M. Pistole. 2017. "College Student Cyberbullying: Self-Esteem, Depression, Loneliness, and Attachment". *Journal of College Counseling* 1(20):7-21.

Reverse Outline

Introduction

- a. Background: relevance of social media use with young adults
- b. Define social media and mental health (Falissard et al. 2017) (Scott et al. 2017)
- c. State thesis

Body Paragraph 1

Online networking leads to social support and creates a positive outlet for self-expression.

- a. Junghyun and Lee (2011) survey with Facebook use
- b. Honest and positive self-presentation
- c. Students' reported well-being and received social support

Body Paragraph 2

Individuals with anxiety disorders face serious consequences, and these anxiety disorders impact the whole United States, but affect young adults the most frequent.

- a. Impact on United States overall (Vannucci et al. 2017)
- c. Young adults make up the highest number of people with these disorders and they are at the highest risk for developing
- d. State the psychological and physical disadvantages of having an anxiety disorder (Torpy 2011)

Body Paragraph 3

Social media contributes to increased feelings of anxiety and which then can lead to the development of an anxiety disorder.

- a. Vannucci et al. (2017) research on young adults
 - Young adults' social media use and feelings of anxiety
- b. Social media use may increase negative thoughts and add stress
- c. These increased feelings of anxiety can lead to a disorder

Body Paragraph 4

Individuals with depression face life-changing symptoms, and although the United States collectively experiences impacts, young adults are most vulnerable to depression.

- a. Effect on US as a whole (Lin et al. 2016)
- b. Young adults are most likely to develop depression
- c. Symptoms may lead to major life changes
- d. Consistent depressive feelings may lead to a disorder (Culpepper et al. 2015)

Body Paragraph 5

Social media use can cause depressive feelings in young adults.

- a. Lin et al. survey (2016)
- b. Groups with the highest visits of social media a week had most reported levels of depression
- c. The more time daily on social media daily correlates with those in the medium and high categories for depressed feelings

Body Paragraph 6

Online networking such as Facebook increases self-objectification in young adults.

- a. Define self-objectification
- b. Hanna et al. (2013) research on undergraduate students
- c. Increase in self-objectification in both men and women
- d. Constant view of others' appearances online leads to increased self-objectification

Body Paragraph 7

Social media causes young adults to compare their lives to other peoples' lives, called social comparison.

- a. Explain social comparison
- b. Hanna et al. (2013) article
- c. Social media use increased social comparison in both men and women
- d. Upward social comparison contributes to negative self-evaluations
- e. Comes from the constant insight to others' lives

Body Paragraph 8

Social media lowers over-all self-esteem in young adults.

- a. Define self-esteem
- b. Hanna et al. (2013) article
- c. High amounts of time on Facebook correlated with lower levels of self-esteem in men and women

Body Paragraph 9

Online networking gives young adults an opportunity to cyberbully, and this bullying leads to the victims' decrease in mental health.

- a. Define cyber bullying (Lee 2015)
- b. Varghese and Pistole (2017) article
- c. Impact of cyberbullying on young adults
 - lower self-esteem, higher levels of depression and loneliness

Body Paragraph 10

Additional exploration would be necessary to answer how social media impacts the mental health of other people aside from the general young adult category

- a. People in different age groups
- b. Those with preexisting mental illnesses
- c. People with specific racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic class backgrounds.

Conclusion

Although the use of social media among young adults in America often enhances social support, it also leads to cyberbullying, lower levels of self-esteem, and higher levels of anxiety, depression, self-objectification, and social comparison.

- Online networking can increase social support and give people an opportunity to share with others online, but with extensive use, young adults may face negative consequences for their mental health.