The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health of Adolescents: A Research Proposal

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Abstract

As social media use becomes more prevalent for teenagers and late adolescents alike, researchers continue to analyze its associations with mental health and social connectedness. Most studies in this area take a correlational, self-report approach. However, correlational, self-report research neglects to assess cause-and-effect relationships, thus rendering it difficult to ascertain whether social media use causes changes in users' well-being or if social media users already differ on certain variables prior to their use. After analyzing previous studies, this paper discusses their limitations and proposes future research to assess the potential causal relationship of social media use with mental health. The proposal addresses gaps in the literature by calling for experimental research on adolescents' social media use.

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As technology continues to progress in modern society, many more people turn to social media as a way to stay connected. Social media refers to "forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content" (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Despite this specific definition, the concept of social media and the ways to operationalize its use are variable. Previous studies have focused on associations between social media and anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and connectedness/belonging, respectively. Some research studies have found that excessive use of social media is associated with heightened levels of distress, though others have found positive associations such as increased feelings of social connection (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021; Vogel & Rose, 2022; Watson et al., 2022). Social media will inevitably continue to be a topic of research as more apps and websites are developed and used for personal or business purposes, so research must continue to analyze the effects of social media use on individuals' mental health.

In particular, there is a need for more longitudinal research on adolescents and their social media use. According to Pew Research Center (2021), 84% of those between the ages of 18 and 29 use social media. As of 2022, 97% of teenagers say they use the internet daily, and 46% of teens say they use the internet "almost constantly" (Vogels et al., 2022). Further research needs to a) focus on the effects social media has on the well-being of these adolescents over time and b) use robust measures that go beyond self-report instruments. Many studies on social media, including the previously referenced study from Pew Research Center (2021), tend to focus on correlational, self-report data, but this does not determine cause-and-effect, nor does this rule out social desirability bias in participants' responses. With these ideas in mind, this paper reviews

previous studies and presents a research proposal to address the limitations in the current body of research.

Being Intentional with Social Media Use

Because social media accounts are so carefully curated at the discretion of the user, they often depict one's life in a way that is not an accurate representation of reality. Often times, social media is referred to as a person's "highlight reel" due to the tendency to display only the good, seemingly perfect, events in one's life (Hanna et al., 2017). When scrolling through Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter, omitted from display are posts about everyday challenges such as struggles with poverty or academics, family conflict or mental health. This is not to say that people never post about bad or upsetting things in their lives, but many times people are trying to exhibit themselves in a positive light in their social consumption. When viewing such posts there can be a natural tendency to compare oneself to the images of others which can be emotionally distancing and taxing. The resulting comparisons can lead to greater self-objectification, lower self-esteem, poorer mental health, and greater body shame (Hanna et al., 2017).

Despite social media being a common place for social comparison, there are some factors which can impact the type of effects associated with social media use. For instance, Bailey, Matz, Youyou, and Iyengar (2020) found that expressing one's authentic self on social media, rather than an idealized version of oneself, was associated with greater subjective well-being for mood and positive affect. Facebook users (N=10,560) were first asked to complete self-report measures of subjective well-being and a pre-screening personality test. Participants were then asked to post on their social media accounts in ways authentic to their personality test results for seven days and in a self-idealized way for another seven days. Each participant was provided suggestions for how to post in ways which were authentic or self-idealized with regard to their

personality. Subjective well-being measures were taken after each week. At the end, results indicated that posting authentically caused greater positive affect, lowered negative affect, and increased overall mood, but did not impact the more long-term facet of life satisfaction. Nevertheless, the results of this study suggest that, by curating one's social media in an authentic way, social media use can potentially be a more positive psychological experience overall.

Based on the results of the Bailey and colleagues (2020) study, individual social media users, particularly students, seem to have the power to make their social media experience promote better psychological well-being by being authentic in their posts. Prior to reviewing other research studies, it is important to note this existence of individual agency in curating a more positive social media experience for oneself. UC Berkeley author Jeremy Adam Smith (2015) suggested that each social media user consider the types of relationships they would like to have with others on social media, then work toward creating those valuable social connections by being engaged and practicing humility. Smith mentioned that, within social media networks, there will inevitably be people who share opposing views, but highlighting similarities amongst each other and utilizing active listening can enhance the overall social media experience. Additionally, promoting positive messages and images can create "moral elevation", a term coined by psychologist Jonathan Haidt, which refers to an uplifting feeling people experience when they witness acts of human kindness (Haidt, 2005, as cited in Smith, 2015). Therefore, Smith's suggestions for cultivating a more caring social media community are primarily centered around being compassionate to other social media users and promoting positivity.

Hardman Taylor, Zhao, and Bazarova (2022) highlighted the duality of social media use effects under the scope of "relational maintenance" (p. 1). Although Smith's (2015) article called for individuals to make changes to the way in which they use social media, Hardman Taylor,

Zhao, and Bazarova call for a framework to explain the interaction between social media behaviors and their relational processes that ultimately impact the level of connection social media brings. These authors contend that social contact via social media has the potential to facilitate feelings of closeness and relational satisfaction. Contrarily, Hardman Taylor and colleagues (2022) also note that social media use brings the potential risks of jealousy or mistrust in one's close relationships if a person allows social media use to impede on in-person interactions or if social media use becomes a surveillance tool to monitor others' interactions. Therefore, these researchers argue that the intentions for social media use matter him regard to its impacts. For instance, if a person strives to maintain a healthy, communicative relationship through social media use, the impact is likely to be more positive. On the other hand, if there are hostile intentions behind the use of social media, such as surveilling one's partner, there is a greater likelihood that the use will have a less positive impact on the social connection overall (Hardman Taylor et al., 2022). Keeping in mind these suggestions for how to use social media constructively, research studies on social media use and its associations will be discussed.

Studies Highlighting Problematic Social Media Use

Although social media use has a variety of positive associations when used in certain ways, there are limits with regard to what is healthy and what is problematic. When used in moderation, social media can serve as a convenient way to form connections with peers and use technology as a form of contact. However, too much use of social media, even if it has its good qualities, can have a negative impact. Watson and colleagues (2022) conducted a study to explore the way in which adolescents' social media use was correlated with connectedness to others, as well as depression and anxiety symptoms. One element of focus within their study was that of "mattering." Mattering refers to "the degree to which a person perceives him or herself to

be important to others" (p. 98). It was measured using the five-item self-report General Mattering Scale. Watson and colleagues found an association between mattering and social media addiction. Social media addiction was designated as having the following components: "the behavior is most salient in the person's life, used for mood modification, is a source of conflict, and the user experiences tolerance, withdrawal, and relapse" (pp. 96-97). Each participants' level of addiction to social media was measured using the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) to create a composite score. When adolescents felt that they did not matter or did not have meaningful connection with others, they were found to be more at risk for using social media in a compulsive and addictive way, thus receiving higher scores on the BSMAS. It is likely that social media users with higher BSMAS scores sought connection and significance to others via social media due to their perceived lack of mattering to others in person. However, an alternative explanation might be that preoccupation with social media use prevented participants from creating meaningful relationships with peers in person. The direction of the relationship cannot be determined from correlational research. In addition to being associated with a perceived lack of mattering, higher scores of social media addiction were associated with a greater number of anxiety and depressive symptoms, as measured by the Patient Health Questionnaire-4 (PHQ-4).

Watson and colleagues (2022) were successful in their incorporation of multiple related concepts, including social media addiction, mattering, and anxiety and depression symptoms. However, the main limitation with their findings was that each association was merely correlational. There was no experimental aspect to the design of their study, meaning it is not possible to determine whether social media addiction was the true cause of lower perceived levels of mattering and higher levels of anxiety and depression or if people have preexisting

differences which alter the way in which social media use impacts their mental health. Future research on these elements should use a longitudinal or experimental study to confirm the correlational results.

Similar to the social media addiction study by Watson and colleagues (2022), Meshi and Ellithorpe (2021) studied the relationship between problematic social media use and in-person social support versus online social support in a group of undergraduate students (N=403) ranging from age 18 to 38. Problematic social media use was characterized by "preoccupation, mood modification, tolerance, conflict, withdrawal, and relapse of social media use" (p. 2). As seen in study by Watson and colleagues, high levels of social media addiction were associated with more anxiety and depression symptoms, as well as lower perceived levels of mattering. Meshi and Ellithorpe sought to examine the associations of real-life social support, social media social support, depression, anxiety, and social isolation as they related to problematic social media use, which was measured with the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS). Through analysis of these variables, they determined associations between problematic social media use and increased depression, anxiety, and social isolation. The associations were found to be mediated by the social support participants were receiving in real-life. Although problematic social media use was associated with less real-life social support, problematic social media use was associated with more social support within social media. At the same time, these researchers found no significant associations between social media support and mental health symptoms, such as anxiety and depression. The researchers concluded that problematic social media use did, however, have a significant association with increased depression, anxiety and social isolation when accompanied by reduced social support in real-life.

As with the results of the Watson and colleagues (2022) study, the Meshi and Ellithorpe (2021) study does not establish any causality between problematic social media use and mental health. Rather, Meshi and Ellithorpe examined a variety of associations that should be interpreted with this limitation in mind. In addition to the lack of determined causality, the population generalizability should be considered as the participants were all undergraduate students. As mentioned by Meshi and Ellithorpe, it is also important to note that the self-report scales used in their study, including the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale and the PROMIS mental health scale, are based around different time periods. The former is in regard to the past year of one's life and the latter focuses on the last seven days. These differences could impact the associations of social media and mental health. Finally, one more potential limitation within the study was the COVID-19 pandemic coming into focus as the study neared its end, which could have impacted the mental health of participants. However, Meshi and Ellithorpe tried to take precautions by choosing spring 2020 for their data endpoint in order to prevent contamination by this event.

In a study of undergraduate students (N=294) conducted by Tanega and Downs (2020), the relationship between problematic social media use (PSMU) and mental health was analyzed using a survey sent out to college students through Facebook. PSMU was measured using the Social Media Disorder Scale-9. If participants identified with at least five of the nine symptoms within the scale, they were categorized into the "High Cut Score PSMU." These researchers found a significant positive relationship between high PSMU and eating problems, anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, substance use problems, and total symptoms, and a significant negative relationship between PSMU and well-being.

As with the previous two studies, the Tanega and Downs study had its limitations. The primary limitation of the study, like the other two, was the inability to establish causality between social media addiction and its associations with mental health symptoms because the study used self-report surveys distributed to Facebook users. This research method allowed for potential bias in responses and limits the generalizability of the results. An additional factor to be considered was the cutoff score for the PSMU. Because the cutoff score is left to the discretion of the researchers, it is possible that the score one researcher would consider to be problematic would not seem problematic to another researcher.

When taking these studies of problematic social media use into account, they have more similarities than they do differences. Each study found that problematic social media has a complex interaction with a variety of factors, including perceived social support, anxiety, and depression. The format of each study was quite similar, consisting of self-report surveys, usually targeted toward college students. As noted, this limited sample compromises the generalizability of each study. Each study had slightly different foci, though they were all centered around associations with PSMU. Future studies would benefit from using an experimental design to help determine causality, as well as measures with established cutoff scores for PSMU to eliminate other potential alternative interpretations.

Healthy Social Media Use

Although problematic social media use studies may paint a grim picture of social media use in general, it should be noted that there is a host of literature on healthy social media use, as well. Amy Roeder (2020), writer for the Harvard School of Public Health, interviewed Harvard research scientist Mesfin Awoke Bekalu about how social media use can be positive for mental health and well-being. Bekalu and colleagues (2019) surveyed 1,027 American adults and found

that routine social media use, meaning using social media daily to interact with the content of others, was positively associated with social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health. Bekalu told Roeder (2020) that routine use of social media may help to compensate for a lack of in-person interactions due to busy schedules and long-distance relationships. Bekalu further explained that the way in which individuals choose to use social media may have a larger impact on their subsequent well-being than the amount of time spent using social media. For example, using social media to network can increase social well-being. On the other hand, Bekalu and colleagues (2019) found that having an emotional connection to social media use, which included obsessively checking social media for fear of missing out or being upset or feeling disconnected from friends when not using social media, was negatively associated with social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health.

A 2018 study conducted by Victoria Rideout and Susannah Fox involved a national survey of over 1,300 adolescents between the ages of 14-years-old to 22-years-old. The survey assessed participants' depressive symptoms using the Patient Health Questionnaire Depression Scale (PHQ-8) and asked questions about each individual's social media experiences. Rideout and Fox found that 90% of respondents had, at some point, researched mental health issues online. Rideout and Fox also found that, of their participants with moderate to severe symptoms of depression, which was equivalent to 25% of those in the study, 30% said social media is "very" important to them in feeling less alone and 27% said social media is "very" important to them in receiving inspiration from others. Additionally, 25% of survey respondents with moderate to severe symptoms of depression indicated that social media assists them in connecting to supportive advice when they feel stressed, depressed, or anxious, as opposed to 13% of respondents with no depressive symptoms. Because social media is increasingly

becoming a tool adolescents turn to for support and mental health advice, future research should investigate ways in which clinicians and communities can work to make social media an even more supportive and caring place for those who may be seeking help.

In a study conducted by Roberts and David (2022), undergraduate students (N=146) were analyzed on the intensity of their social media use, type of social media use, perceived social connection, and well-being. Intensity of social media use referred to the extent of social media use in participants' daily lives, and was measured by a 7-item, 5-point self-report scale. Type of social media use consisted of active use and passive use, which were measured by a 7-item, 7-point Likert self-report scale. Active use was defined as posting updates about oneself on social media, reacting to others' posts, and communicating with friends. Passive use, on the other hand, was defined as simply browsing others' posts without reacting or communicating. Social connection was measured by a 9-item, 7-point Likert self-report scale. Items from the scale included, "I feel distant from people," "I have no sense of togetherness with my peers," and "I find myself losing all sense of connectedness with society." Well-being was measured through a subjective 5-item survey. Through their research, Roberts and David were able to make a few conclusions: First, they noted that social media intensity is negatively associated with perceived social connection. Second, social media intensity was related to the type of social media use (active versus passive). When students used social media more passively than actively, social media intensity was negatively associated with perceived social connection. Thus, type of social media use acted as a moderating effect on perceived social connection. Third, social connection was found to be significantly negatively associated with stress, which means passive use of social media is indirectly related to stress. All in all, Roberts and David determined that social

media intensity, type of use, and the interaction between the two contribute to a person's perception of social connectedness, and thus their stress level as well.

The research from Roberts and David (2022) offers important insight into the way in which social media intensity and type of use mitigate the effects of social media use on perceived social connection. Their research was broken down into two correlational studies and one experimental one, which built on one another and offered additional clarification. The first two provided preliminary correlational data, while the third included manipulation of social media use (heavy versus light) and type of use (passive versus active). Results of the experimental portion of their research confirmed the results in the correlational portion. Because the study included both correlational and experimental data, it offers a more thorough explanation than if there were only correlational research derived from self-report surveys. However, there is still a need for further experimental research examining the relationship between social media intensity and social connection to determine whether their effect on one another is unidirectional or bidirectional. Longitudinal studies could help examine the direction of the relationship, as well as investigate some of the reasons why the type of social media use is influential on social connection, stress, and well-being.

In a similar notion to the Roberts and David (2022) study, Vogel and Rose (2017) sought to focus on different uses of social media and how these differences impact perceived social connection and stress. Vogel and Rose were interested in the ways in which people seek to present themselves on social media. Rather than conducting their own study, Vogel and Rose analyzed studies that had already been conducted using self-presentation as a theoretical framework. The self-presentation framework suggests that there are two foci options when it comes to one's own social media: other-oriented focus and self-oriented focus. Other-oriented

focus involves the comparison of oneself to others on social media, usually in an upward fashion. In other words, people are viewing other people's idealistically-construed social media and focusing on all the positive aspects of that person's life that they themselves may not have. Other-oriented focus is found to have associations with envy, low self-concept, and decreased psychological well-being. Self-oriented focus refers to positively constructing one's own social media, often resulting in a more ideal view of oneself. The action of updating and viewing one's own social media profile can create self-affirmation, ultimately increasing self-esteem (Gonzalez & Hancock, 2011, as cited in Vogel & Rose, 2017). Therefore, in order to maintain positive well-being, Vogel and Rose suggest focusing mainly on one's own social media profile, as well as close friends. Because one can determine that a close friend's life is not as it appears on social media, their posts do not hold the same negative results as viewing an acquaintance's social media which depicts a seemingly perfect life (Chou & Edge, 2012, as cited in Vogel & Rose, 2017). With that being said, the authors ultimately indicate that social media use has good qualities, but its users should be mindful of the way in which they use it, who they interact with on their social media outlets, and how often they use social media.

Vogel and Rose (2017) were successful in illustrating many of the factors mitigating the effects of social media use. They offered research supporting both positive and negative sides of the social media debate. Vogel and Rose included ways in which social media use can be associated with negative impacts on psychological well-being, while also providing information on how social media use can be positive. However, because this article was more a summary of previous research, it does not help to tackle the persistent question of whether social media use impacts psychological well-being or if the personal well-being influences the way in which social media is used. Instead, the focus is more on correlations without certain causation.

Nevertheless, Vogel and Rose's article provided a simple and easy to understand overview of current research surrounding social media and its associations with social connection and well-being.

Although both the Roberts and David (2022) and Vogel and Rose (2017) articles provide helpful knowledge with regard to the impacts of social media on social connection with others, they both indicated a need for further longitudinal studies accounting for the way in which social media is used, how often social media is used, and who the interactions involve. Accounting for these differences in a person's social media use will help to create a clearer depiction of the way in which social media influences people and further help to understand how to make social media a better and more psychologically positive place to make connections with others.

Summary of Extant Research

Based on the research studies discussed previously, the effects of social media use are dependent on a variety of factors. Problematic social media use, defined as having characteristics of "preoccupation, mood modification, tolerance, conflict, withdrawal, and relapse" (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021, p. 2) was found to be associated with more negative outcomes, including lack of mattering, increased depression and anxiety symptoms, eating problems, substance abuse problems, and lowered well-being (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021; Tanega & Downs, 2020; Watson et al., 2022). Using social media in a non-addictive, non-dependent, routine way, on the other hand, was found to have positive associations with subjective social well-being, positive mental health, self-rated health, perceived social connectedness, and feeling supported when depressed, stressed, or anxious (Rideout & Fox 2018; Roeder, 2020). In these ways, most studies did not indicate that social media use was in-and-of-itself bad nor good. Rather, the positive versus negative outcomes of social media use were usually mitigated by factors such as the type of

social media use, the intensity of use, and the portrayal of oneself on social media. According to Bailey and colleagues (2022), positive effects from social media use can be elicited when authentically portraying oneself on social media. Roberts and David (2022) argued that positive effects of social media use can be elicited when actively engaging on social media sites, rather than browsing passively. Bekalu and colleagues (2019) stated that using social media routinely rather than out of intense emotional connection to social media is associated with positive outcome variables, such as social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health. Therefore, previous research indicates that the impacts of social media use have the potential to be positive if social media is used in specific ways.

Limitations

Studies of social media use cover a wide range of ideas including healthy versus problematic use, active versus passive use, reasons for use, and frequency of use, to name a few (Bailey et al., 2020; Bekalu et al., 2019; Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021; Roberts & David, 2022; Tanega & Downs, 2020). Researchers come to a variety of conclusions based on the variables they measure, the data they collect, how they collected the data, and from whom they collect the data. For instance, most studies conduct correlational, self-report-based research from undergraduate college students (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021; Roberts & David, 2022; Tanega & Downs, 2020). Although this is a convenient way to collect data, research on undergraduate students is not always representative of the actual population, nor are self-report measures always accurate due to social desirability bias in answers. Some studies utilize an experimental design, though these often still collect self-report data about a person's social media use (Bailey et al., 2020). There remains a possibility that participants will alter their answers about how

much time they spend on social media, how they use social media, and how they feel when using social media in order to give what they believe are the acceptable or desired answers.

Current Research Proposal

Based on the previously mentioned limitations of past research studies, there appears to be a need for more studies with experimental designs, as well as ones that use longitudinal design. Correlational research does not determine the direction of the relationships between social media use, social connection, general well-being, and symptoms of anxiety and depression. Without causational, experimental research, it is not possible to determine whether social media and its relationships with variables are unidirectional or bidirectional. Therefore, future research would do well to focus on longitudinal studies and experimental studies, especially of adolescents and young adults, since they are two groups who tend to use social media sites the most and are probably also more susceptible to being impacted psychologically by their use (Pew Research Center, 2021; Vogels et al., 2022).

If researchers wanted to conduct an experimental study in order to further examine the impacts of social media, they could gather social media users between the ages of 10-years-old and 24-years-old and randomly assign them to groups on facets such as social media intensity (high versus low), type of social media use (active versus passive), and type of portrayal on social media (authentic versus idealized self). Participants in these groups would take preliminary measures of personality, well-being, anxiety and depression symptoms, emotional attachment to social media, and social connectedness in order to get baseline measures of these variables and determine any preliminary differences between participants. The study would employ a 12-week ABAB type study, alternating between participants' regular social media use and the extremes of each variable (intensity, type of use, and type of portrayal). After each week

of the study, self-report measures would be collected regarding anxiety and depression symptoms, well-being, and perceptions of in-person social connectedness, as well as online social connectedness. After every four weeks, researchers will check in with third-party individuals who have consistent relationships with the participants, such as teachers, counselors, or advisors, in order to receive more objective data about how students are doing psychologically and socially. Meanwhile, computer software will be tracking participants' use of social media, including how often they spend on social media each day, what types of posts they interact with the most, and how they are using social media (e.g., to communicate with others, to compare themselves to peers, to portray themselves in a certain way).

To begin the study, each participant will use social media in their typical, unaltered way for a week. Their regular social media use will be monitored by computer software to establish baseline measures. Then, for the next twelve weeks, participants will rotate through each category of social media use: high intensity, low intensity, active use, passive use, authentic self-portrayal, and idealized self-portrayal, with every other week being a control week in which participants will default back to their regular social media use. Prior to engaging in the different variables of study, participants will be coached on strategies for each type of use. So, for instance, a participant would be assigned to low social media intensity use one week, would complete self-report measures, then would be assigned to high social media use the next week, and would complete more self-report measures after. During the third week, participants would move to the next variable of study and repeat the process. Rotating between experiential weekly assignments and regular social media use will allow researchers to compare the differences in effects of social media use on anxiety and depression symptoms, perceptions of social connectedness, and general well-being.

In order to combat social desirability bias in the weekly self-report measures and to ensure compliance with the assigned variable of study, computer software will be monitoring participants' social media use every week. Additionally, as previously mentioned, periodic third-party data from teachers, counselors, and advisors will provide more insight into the effects of different types of social media use. The intent here is to further analyze the direction of relationships between social media use, mental health, and social connection with regard to the mediating factors of type of use, portrayal of oneself, and social media intensity.

Social media use and its relation to mental health can be a tricky topic to analyze because there are so many relationships between its use and various elements of individuals' lives. At the same time, social media is ubiquitous and does not appear to be going away in the future. Therefore, researchers need to continue to create different types of studies in hopes of investigating more relationships between social media use, social connectedness, and mental health.

Conclusion

As social media becomes more prevalent, particularly in the lives of adolescents, there is greater need for analyzing the impacts of its use. While relationships between social media and mental health effects can be challenging to tease out, the research will be well worth it as it will provide a better understanding of how to make social media use a more positive experience. In cultivating a more constructive and positive social media experience, the goal is to minimize negative psychological effects and maximize overall well-being. With more experimental research studies, this path to a more positive social media experience is likely to be expedited.

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