

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON MENTAL HEALTH

Neha

M.A Mass Communication

Sri Guru Ram Rai University, Dehradun Uttarakhand

INTRODUCTION

Social media can serve multiple purposes, for example providing a need in several areas such as communication, entertainment, and/or occupation. However, with the increase in social media use, individuals have been impacted in various ways, including financial, behavioral, and personal mental health. Further research on the impact of social media use on an individual's overall mental health is only going to become more relevant due amount of use and the number of areas social media can have influence on an individual's life.

With increasing amounts of research being conducted for social media impact on personal mental health, there have been several identified limitations when it comes to the populations studied. It is more common to look at younger populations, Generation Z, regarding this topic. There have not been studies specifically that have considered age cohort comparisons for social media impact, which laid the foundation for the current study.

The current study aimed to look at the broad impact of social media and to compare reported levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and self-esteem on the Millennial generation, which are individuals born between the years of 1981 and 1995, and Generation Z, which are individuals born between the years of 1996 and 2012. Based on prior literature, it is believed that Generation Z will report more negative mental health scores because they grew up in the prime of social media and the internet. However, this may also be the case with Millennials that were born toward the end of the generation. This study targeted four areas of mental health: depression, anxiety, stress, and self-esteem, which will be the focus of the current study.

MENTAL HEALTH

Depression is a mental health disorder characterized by persistently depressed mood or loss of interest in activities, causing significant impairment in life. Depression is a condition that can occur once, or through multiple episodes. During depressive periods various symptoms occur. The symptoms of depression include tiredness, loss of interest, angry outbursts, reduced appetite, and in some cases, suicidal thoughts. Depression is a condition that can affect individuals in different ways, the effects ranging from mild to severe.

Anxiety disorder is a mental health disorder characterized by feelings of worry, anxiety, or fear that are strong enough to interfere with one's daily activities. Experiencing anxiety is considered a normal part of life; however, individuals with anxiety disorder frequently have episodes that severely impact one's daily activities, making it difficult to function. The symptoms of anxiety disorder include increased heart rate, hyperventilation, sense of impending danger, difficulty controlling worry, and even having the urge to end things that cause anxiety. Anxiety episodes can peak within minutes and can be extremely difficult to control. Stress is a feeling of emotional or physical tension; it can come from any event or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, or nervous. It is not uncommon to experience stress in one's daily life, yet it is essential to recognize that stress can impact more than just emotions or mood, it can take a physical toll. Stress symptoms include headaches, forgetfulness, tiredness, lack of energy, and can even lead to the use of alcohol or drugs. Although it is common to experience stress in one's everyday life, mild or situational stress tends to be temporary. In contrast, chronic stress persists over extended periods of time.

Psychological well-being breaks down into one subsection: self-esteem. Self-esteem is the positive or negative feelings individuals have about themselves. Various social and personal influences impact self-esteem, whether positive or negative. Emotional moods, personal ideas of oneself, and perceptions of social relationships reflect on self-esteem and determine whether it is high or low, positive or negative. Essentially, self-esteem fluctuates throughout daily activities based on performance or events that can occur in one's social life.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is an ever-changing, growing phenomenon since its inception. Social media is software designed primarily to facilitate social interaction. Social media developers have sought to draw more individuals online through various media formats. Essentially, social media is one of the most captivating and accessible ways to keep in touch and communicate with other individuals. "In July 2012, the number of individuals using social media had risen 5 percent, to about 172 million people," and it can be assumed that those numbers have only continued to rise. However, with the increased use of social media, the mental health of participating individuals has seen an increase in research interest. In 2018, a study focused on finding the relationship between social media use and depression and anxiety. After conducting a cluster analysis, these authors concluded individuals that use social media report higher levels of both depression and anxiety. Higher levels of depression and anxiety were not common for those with limited social media use. There was an earlier study conducted out of this lab among young adults in the United States looking to identify an association between the number of social media platforms used with depression and anxiety. The researchers concluded participants who used seven or more social media platforms reported

elevated levels of depression and anxiety. In a study by Lin, Sidani, Shensa, Radovic, Miller, Colditz, Hoffman, Giles, & Primack (2016) also focused on young adults and the association between depression and social media use, participants who used social media frequently showed more symptoms of depression as opposed to those who reported limited social media use. A separate study, focusing on young adults and a social media use connection to depression, reported similar findings but reached a slightly different conclusion. Social media was said to be associated with depressive symptoms among individuals; however, the identified association was based on how social media was used instead of how long it was used.

FACEBOOK

Facebook is one of the three social media platforms the current study included in data collection. This platform was established in February of 2004 by founder Mark Zuckerberg. Facebook was one of the first platforms in the ongoing era of social media. Many individuals today use it, including individuals from both the Millennial generation and Generation Z. Since Facebook is one of the first platforms to gain popularity, there has been research on its impact on depression, anxiety and psychological well-being.

In 2020 there was a study specifically focusing on young adults in Germany. The study aimed to identify the relationship between reasons for social media use, daily stress, depression, and anxiety. The study concluded social interaction, self-presentation, information seeking, relaxation, entertainment, as well as others were the reasons for using social media. However, the results were inconclusive in determining the relationship between social media use, depression, anxiety, and daily stress. Another study focused on finding the relationship between reasoning for the use of social media and psychological well-being among young adults. The study explicitly focused on self-objectification and social comparison in terms of the reasoning individuals have to use social media. It was concluded that social comparison and self-objectification mediate the relationship between Facebook use and psychological well-being. Social comparison and self-objectification tend to be the primary reasons as to why social media use occurs among young adults.

INSTAGRAM

Instagram is the second social media platform this study intends to include in the data collected. It was established in October 2010 by founder Mark Zuckerberg. Mark Zuckerberg established Instagram as a branch of Facebook. It is a social platform used to share photos of individuals' lives. Like Facebook, it is prevalent, primarily because of its simplicity. Since Instagram is still one of the newer social media platforms, there is limited research regarding its impact on the relationship between Instagram use and mental health.

In 2016, a study was conducted specifically focusing on the connection between Instagram use, loneliness, and social comparison. Many previous studies have looked at the connection between social media use and loneliness before, but the results have been inconclusive, so this study specifically into Instagram as the only social media platform. The study was survey-based and focused on 208 undergraduate participants between the ages of 18 and 25. It was concluded that browsing on Instagram was related to lower levels of loneliness, but broadcasting, which is what influencers engage in, was related to higher levels of loneliness. It was also found that users that engaged in upward social comparison reported higher levels of loneliness. Another study published in 2016 also focused on the relationship between social media use and loneliness, while considering specific platforms: Instagram and Twitter. Researchers hypothesized that picture-based platforms create more of a social presence, allowing them to better combat loneliness compared to text-based platforms. The study utilized a mixed-method survey design focusing on 253 undergraduate participants. It was concluded that using more image-based platforms, like Instagram, is associated with lower levels of loneliness.

TWITTER

Twitter is the third social media platform this study intends to consider. Twitter was established in March 2006 by founder Jack Dorsey. Twitter is a social platform that combines characteristics of both Instagram and Facebook. Although Twitter was launched before Instagram, it does not have the same popularity among both the Millennial generation and Generation Z. It is more commonly used by individuals between the ages of 18 and 23 and is starting to gain more popularity across the age span. Due to this, there has been limited research conducted on the relationship between social media and user mental health.

A study published in 2015 looked to find the differences in personality among users that use both Twitter and Facebook and users that only use Facebook. Petrocchi and researchers hypothesized that Facebook only users would positively correlate with feelings of loneliness, whereas users of both platforms would have no significant correlation with loneliness. The study was survey-based and focused in 214 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 23 years old. The conclusion was supported by the hypothesis, for Facebook only users, who reported more hours of usage on the one platform for higher levels of loneliness than users of both Twitter and Facebook.

In 2016 a study was conducted with the intention to identify a relationship between life satisfaction, happiness, and Twitter use. The study specifically aimed to see if life satisfaction could be interrupted by outlying societal factors, like politics, disasters. The study utilized a surveillance methodology where researchers observed tweets that were posted. It

was found that expressions of life satisfaction were immune to current events (political, disasters, etc.) and showed few random fluctuations.

A study conducted in 2018 by Brailovskaia and Margraf looking at German students and the impact social media has on mental health, the researchers used survey methodology. The findings led the authors to conclude Twitter is associated with depression, anxiety, and stress. The researchers state findings may be due to the nature of the platform. Twitter is not considered as interactive as other social media platforms, making it more difficult for individuals to improve mental health status.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to the relationship between social media and mental health, it has been more common to conclude social media negatively impacts mental health. However, there are studies that suggest exceptions to these conclusions for a negative impact. There is a range of findings on the relationship between social media and mental health. Impacts on mental health differ based on the reasons as to why it is used and even how individuals are using it. There simply is not enough research on the topic to know what impact social media has on user mental health. Looking at studies that have already been conducted, there has been a variety of reported limitations. Most studies reported problems with participants enacting social desirability when filling out surveys, which limited the findings of the studies because participants could have altered responses based on perceived notions of desirability. It is also common for studies to be conducted with only young adults, specifically from Generation Z, and no individuals from the Millennial generation. This limits findings because they become less generalizable to the entire population. It was recommended that future studies focus on multiple age groups to make conclusions more generalizable. Due to the recommendations, this study investigated the impact of social media on mental health across two age groups, comparing the Millennial generation and Generation Z. This study fills the gaps of knowledge to existing research with specific regard to the ages considered and cohort differences on the impact social media has on personal mental health.

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