Social Media and Mental Health



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Introduction

Introducing Social Media and Mental Health

The usage of social media platforms such as Facebook, which has over 1.5 billion users, is now becoming an integral part of the social life for college students within the United States (Primack et al., 2017). About 90% of young adults in the U.S. who use social media visit these sites at least once a day, which means that this population of U.S. citizens is constantly taking in social media content for extended periods (Primack et al., 2017). While social media might bring some benefits to the individual using it, there are numerous findings which indicate that increased time spent on social media can be related to changes in mental health (Primack et al., 2017).

While Facebook still tends to be a very popular social media platform, another has risen and is taking its place among Facebook as one of the most used social media platforms; Instagram has become one of the most popular platforms that people frequent on a daily basis. Instagram was created in 2010 that primarily focuses either on photo or video posting, which is the uploading of image content to the site, to convey meaning. Whereas Facebook allows for text, photo, and video posting, Instagram differs by only allowing users to post a photo or video with a limited caption.

Studies concerning Instagram have found similar results as the studies of Facebook in terms of their relationship to the mental health of their users, which will be discussed further in this comprehensive senior project (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). Instagram usage has also been found to be correlated with an increase of depressive-like symptoms in young adults

between the ages of 18 and 29. The correlation provides an interesting point; platforms that post only visual elements also indicate an increase in depression. This means there might be more to the link of depression than just the posted elements (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). Due to these findings, this in-depth research paper will focus on both Facebook and Instagram in unison to better understand the relationship between mental health and social media use.

Background of Social Media and Mental Health

Since many studies have indicated that social media usage has been related to changes in the mental health of the people who frequent these platforms, the best start is by seeing how this change affects users.

The article "Use of Multiple Social Media Platforms and Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety: A Nationally-Representative Study Among U.S. Young Adults", written by Primack and colleagues, provided useful information on the relationship of social media and mental health by surveying a nationally-representative sample of 1,787 U.S. young adults with ages ranging from 19 to 32 (Primack et al., 2017).

In the study, researchers looked at the number of social media platforms young adults used by using data that was collected over 18 months (Primack et al., 2017). The data was then organized into groups based on the number of platforms the participants used frequently. The categories were quantified at 0-2 sites, 3-4 sites, 5-6 sites, or 7-11 sites (Primack et al., 2017). Overall, the researchers found that an increase in the number of platforms used by participants was directly related to a higher risk of depressive symptoms. While this information is valuable, this merely indicates a correlation between mental health and the number of platforms used, rather than the specific use of Facebook or Instagram.

Bringing attention to Facebook, the correlation to poor mental health has been noted in multiple different studies. In the study "Comparing Facebook Users and Facebook Non-Users: Relationship Between Personality Traits and Mental Health Variables - an Exploratory Study", researchers indicated a correlation between personality traits and mental health (Brailovskaia and Margraf, 2016). Facebook users scored higher on narcissism, self-esteem, and extraversion as well as placing more emphasis on values of social support, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness than non-users (Brailovskaia and Margraf, 2016). Facebook non-users were found to have higher values of depression symptoms than those who were using the social media platform, which might be due to factors such as community involvement on the site. (Brailovskaia and Margraf, 2016). Overall, the big takeaway from this study was that Facebook may actually foster the user's desire to protect mental health (Brailovskaia and Margraf, 2016).

Comparing the study by Brailovskaia and Margraf to Primack et.al., the main conclusion is that using Facebook does not equate to having negative mental health outcomes (Brailovskaia and Margraf, 2016). It turns out that users of Facebook can still live a happy life and protect their mental health while using the platform. This indicates that there is something more going on than a mere use of the platform that correlates to negative mental health outcomes.

While Facebook has been a well-known platform, Instagram has also been found to have some of the same mental health correlations. "Instagram #Instasad?: Exploring Associations Among Instagram Use, Depressive Symptoms, Negative Social Comparison, and Strangers Followed" provides information that supports the findings of Primack and colleagues (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). The study was intended to test a grounded model of the association between Instagram use and depressive symptoms through the mechanics of *negative social comparison*, meaning to negatively compare one's self to another person. The study found that Instagram use

was slightly positively associated with changes in the mental health of those using the application. In general, researchers found that the difference between a positive effect on the user's mental health and a negative one had to do with the number of strangers the user followed. Those who followed more strangers had an increased likelihood of engaging in negative social comparison and exhibiting depressive symptoms when they spent more time on the platform.

However, just like the Brailovskaia and Margraf study, Lup and colleagues also indicated through their research that Instagram itself is not the only factor in the relationship between usage and mental health changes (Brailovskaia and Margraf, 2016). In that study, participants showed lower levels of negative mental health symptoms when following friends as opposed to strangers; they were able to show that the way users interact with Instagram was what directly related to their change in mental health.

The purpose of this paper is to look at these findings simultaneously in order to identify and distinguish between the qualities of social media that may influence the mental health of the user, whether the effect may be positive or negative. To do this, I will use the *media practice model* which focuses on the role of media choices as influences on intentions and behaviors (Moreno and Whitehill, 2014). This model states that while people choose content and interact with social media platforms that reflect who they are in the current moment, users also explore information or follow content that reflects experiences and behaviors they desire to embody (Moreno and Whitehill, 2014). This observation is one way to relate to the articles mentioned above, giving insight into why certain social media users do not have the same changes to their mental health as others, though it is not the only factor that will be used to distinguish between positive and negative social media use.

In the study titled “Social Media and Depression Symptoms: A Network Perspective”, researchers Albers and colleagues discuss two key concepts that might shed light on the differences among users and their mental health outcomes when using social media: *passive social media usage* (PSMU) and *active social media usage* (ASMU). Their study considered how PSMU versus ASMU affected the mental health of undergraduate psychology students, with a focus on which of these behaviors is more likely to cause symptoms of depression (Aalber et al., 2019). To test for this, researchers applied a network perspective to see the connections between the different variables they were tested. Overall, they found that while participants who spent more time on social media with a PSMU style did experience higher mean levels of depressed mood, the network structure indicated PSMU and AMSU only affected each other (Aalber et al., 2019). This affirms that social media use is connected to higher rates of depression among those who partake, however, does not show signs that social media use causes depression.

Looking at all of these elements together, this paper will focus on the positive (Chapter 2) and negative (Chapter 3) relationships between social media use and mental health, the real-world implications of the information provided (Chapter 4), and finally, how users can apply these findings to their interactions with social media in order to foster positive mental health (Chapter 5).

Positive Relationship Between Social Media and Mental Health

While most studies look at the negative relationship between social media and mental health, there are positive outcomes on the mental health of those who use social media platforms. One of the main factors contributing to positive mental health outcomes is being cognizant of what content the user is seeking out (Radovic et al, 2016).

In the study titled "Depressed Adolescents' Positive and Negative Use of Social Media", Radovic and colleagues explored how social media use may influence and be influenced by psychological distress (Radovic et al, 2016). For this study, the researchers took 23 adolescents who were diagnosed with depression, of whom 18 were female and 5 were male. The adolescents in the study described positive and negative use of Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram (Radovic et al, 2016). Through this research, Radovic and colleagues did find that there were benefits to using social media that were related to better mental health conditions in the participants, which will be discussed more in later chapters of this paper (Radovic et al, 2016).

Social Media as a Distractor

One of the key positive aspects that were addressed through this research was the availability of information that could distract the user from real-life events (Radovic et al, 2016). When interacting with and creating positive content like entertainment and humor, users were found to have a better relationship between social media use and their mental health (Radovic et al, 2016). For those who were already affected by negative mental health, positive content provided an outlet for distraction; the use of the social media platform lessened the amount of time that the individual was occupied with their negative mental health symptoms. This, in turn, caused a decrease in the overall effects of depression that they were experiencing. Content

creation also goes along with this theme. By being able to create a persona that may not be feasible in real life to do certain factors, a person can experience a level of freedom that can lessen their negative mental health symptoms (Radovic et al, 2016). In the study, one participant recorded that being able to express their gender identity through their social media helped to relieve the pressure of stigma that was being created by their parents (Radovic et al, 2016). This means that by having the ability to express their true identity, the user was able to feel some relief from the negative impact of having their gender rejected by family members (Radovic et al, 2016).

Social Media's Use of Positive Images and Quotes

Another key factor in lessening the effects of negative mental health is that of positive images and quotes (Radovic et al, 2016). Positive images were key themes in improving the mental health of the individuals in the study (Radovic et al, 2016). By bringing in information that fosters a positive outlook on life can distract from what the individual is going through in the real world (Radovic et al, 2016). The same can be said for quotes or messages through applications or social media platforms. By reading positive affirmations, the individual using the social media platform can increase their wellbeing just like with viewing images. The key is that the images and quotes are positive in content.

Gratitude and Social Comparison on Facebook

Now shifting the attention onto Facebook specifically, there is also research that indicates a positive effect of using the platform. One study indicated that showing gratitude while using Facebook can be related to better mental health effects (Horner, 2016). "Could Sharing Gratitude on Facebook Improve the Well-Being of Young People?" indicated that while just using Facebook alone will not improve the mental health of the individual, showing gratitude can

(Horner, 2016). The participants posted grateful or neutral learning status updates on the Facebook platform daily for ten consecutive days (Horner, 2016). This study took 70 Facebook users aged 16-18 and gave them online surveys with a six-week follow-up.

The results of the study indicated two interesting ideas. First, just indicating gratitude on the Facebook platform was not related to the improvement of the mental health of the participants (Horner, 2016). This means that just being positive in the creation of content does not equate to improving mental health. However, the second interesting concept found in this article was that there is a relation to these posts as long as others positively acknowledge the post itself (Horner, 2016). While posting alone did not improve the mental health of participants, interacting with the content posted positively can be related to better mental health.

In another article titled "Social Comparison on Facebook: Its Antecedents and Psychological Outcomes", the possible benefits of using this platform are addressed through the use of *social comparison theory* (Jang et al., 2016). This study looked at the social comparison process occurring on Facebook by assessing social support systems (Jang et al., 2016). Social support through this study was not seen as a negative, but as a positive in terms of how using the platform is related to mental health (Jang et al., 2016). Having a large network of people that are available to communicate with and support the user was related to a positive effect on mental health (Jang et al., 2016). By building an online community of friends, the individual using the platform can create a sense of belonging; this connectedness works to increase self-esteem and perceived self-worthiness (Jang et al., 2016).

Considering that the number of friends a user has can be a key factor, Kim and colleagues did a study titled "The Facebook Paths to Happiness: Effects of the Number of Facebook Friends and Self-Presentation on Subjective Well-Being" (Kim et al., 2011). In this study, the researchers

looked at the number of friends a user of Facebook has in relation to their mental health (Kim et al., 2011). They did not just focus on the number of friends a person has, but the difference between posting content strategies; The researchers through this study also focused on the self-presentation strategies of *positive*, which is portraying yourself in a positive light, versus *honest*, which is portraying yourself honestly (Kim et al., 2011). By looking at self-presentation strategies, the researchers were able to relate certain strategies to better mental health outcomes (Kim et al., 2011). It is important to note that both modes of self-presentation were related to better mental health because either way, users of Facebook have a way to use the social media platform in a positive way (Kim et al., 2011). The study did indicate that the best method to increase positive mental health effects was to combine the number of Facebook friends with the positive self-presentation method (Kim et al., 2011). However, honest self-presentation did show an effect but was not seen upfront with the positive self-presentation method. (Kim et al., 2011). Combining all of this, Facebook can be used to better the mental health of an individual using the platform.

Positive Images and Communities on Instagram

Studies of Instagram have yielded similar results to those of Facebook in relation to communities and positive images. Under these conditions, users can positively affect their mental health through building support communities and engaging with positive images.

In the study titled "#Bodypositivity: A Content Analysis of Body Positive Accounts on Instagram", researchers looked at the most fundamental aspect of Instagram, image and video posts (Cohen et al., 2019). The results of this study are important when understanding how Instagram operates. While Facebook focuses more on posting word-based content, Instagram is pictorial. What the researchers found in the pictures was that there were positive undertones in

the images that were being grouped into the category as body-positive (Cohen et al., 2019). This could have a profound impact on the population of people affected by eating disorders or body dysmorphia. The body-positive community places emphasis on acceptance and self-love, allowing for the creation of support groups that encourage members to post using honest or positive self-presentation (Cohen et al., 2019). This may allow users to find a sense of belonging and ease; this sense of belonging and comfortability then can be related to positive mental health outcomes.

Instagram can also be an outlet for those who are severely depressed and may be contemplating suicide (Carlyle et al., 2018). The study "Suicide-Related Conversations on Instagram" looks into depressed and suicidal communities on Instagram, and whether or not they have a positive influence on its members (Carlyle et al., 2018).

This study found that while these communities are present, that does not mean that they are contributing to the negative mental health effects that the individuals who follow them have and while these communities do post content that brings up the discussion of depression, they also foster the ability to get help for negative mental health symptoms (Carlyle et al., 2018). In many cases, the content posted is meant to comfort followers, showing members of the community that they aren't suffering alone; the tone can be hopeful and encourage recovery. (Carlyle et al., 2018). Some posts include information on where to find help, contact information for suicide hotlines, and public education that can be used to better understand or treat the symptoms of negative mental health (Carlyle et al., 2018).

In this case, the key element of a positive Instagram experience is social support (Carlyle et al., 2018). While the topics of suicide and depression can be difficult for members to discuss

in person, an online community with relative anonymity can make it easier to encourage users to examine and talk about their mental health(Carlyle et al., 2018).

Continuing with the theme of social communities, the article “Strangers Are Friends I Haven't Met Yet: A Positive Approach to Young People's Use of Social Media”, Wang and Edwards explore more in-depth how young people build and foster their communities online (Wang and Edwards, 2016). The purpose of their research was to look at how content consumers use Instagram as a space to practice identity and relationship management strategies (Wang and Edwards, 2016). The use of social media tools provides young adults with the opportunity to manage different categories of relationships, such as family and friends, while using social media platforms (Wang and Edwards, 2016). In doing so, individuals can bring techniques they’ve learned online into the real world, with those they interact with in person (Wang and Edwards, 2016). Along with this, the individuals in the study also indicated that they were keener on keeping their real-life relationships intact just like they would with their social media relationships (Wang and Edwards, 2016).

By being able to use Instagram as a tool shows a benefit to the user. This allows for specialization to happen without repercussions in the real world. The application is being used as a trial ground for the techniques that will later be used to grow the relationships that have been created already in the real world. By being able to test these techniques, the negative mental health symptoms associated with trying them out in the real world diminish, allowing for a more confident and improved demeanor.

Furthermore, these are just some of the ways in which social media can be viewed in a positive way. Even though most research is looking into the negative effects of social media use on mental health, some positives are overlooked. Fostering communities, creating confidence,

and establishing techniques to navigate the real world are just a few ways in which social media can be used as a benefit to mental health instead of a negative.

Negative Relationship Between Social Media and Mental Health

General Negative Effects of Social Media Use

While social media is not all negative, research has often focused on the unhealthy impact social media use can have on mental health, which can be pervasive to worsening mental health. One of the causes of this is that the use of social media has been linked to risky behaviors, cyberbullying, and self-denigrating comparisons to others (Radovic et al., 2016). One of the biggest contributing factors in this relationship was found to be the amount of time a user spends on social media (Radovic et al., 2016). Researchers discovered that there is a correlation between more time spent increasing the negative mental health outcomes reported (Radovic et al., 2016). Negative effects of social media use were psychological distress, unmet mental health needs, and suicidal ideations (Radovic et al., 2016).

This is not the only study indicating that social media, in general, can worsen the mental health of those who use these platforms. The article "Use of Multiple Social Media Platforms and Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety: A Nationally-Representative Study Among U.S. Young Adults", written by Primack and colleagues, provides information about the number of platforms that are being used as another factor in this relationship (Primack et al., 2017).

By surveying a nationally-representative sample of 1,787 U.S. young adults with ages ranging from 19 to 32, researchers were able to create a broad understanding of the effects of social media (Primack et al., 2017). In this study, researchers looked at the number of social media platforms young adults were a part of collected for 18 months (Primack et al., 2017). The data was then organized into groups based on the number of platforms the participants used frequently. The categories were quantified at 0-2 sites, 3-4 sites, 5-6 sites, or 7-11 sites (Primack et al., 2017).

Overall, the researchers found that the more platforms that the participants frequented correlated with higher risks of depressive-like symptoms. This association was enough to indicate that social media usage does affect young adults and their risk of depression, which is validated by more specific research experiments.

Negative Association of Social Comparison on Facebook

Moving more into social media platforms, specifically Facebook, social comparison plays a big factor in this negative relationship between social media and mental health (Kim and Park, 2016). This study examined how users felt when comparing themselves to photos of "attractive" versus "unattractive" people; researchers found that when comparing themselves to attractive photos, the participants of the study felt worse about their body image (Kim and Park, 2016). This social comparison shows the negative effects of social media use because it focuses on the basic function of social media, to post content (Kim and Park, 2016).

Relating Facebook to negative mental health outcomes, it seems that Facebook might be more harmful than helpful when addressing social comparisons (Feinstein et al., 2013). An article titled "Negative Social Comparisons on Facebook and Depressive Symptoms: Rumination as a Mechanism", produced by Feinstein and colleagues also focused on social comparisons and their relation to depression (Feinstein et al., 2013). Overall, this study came to find that Facebook users were likely to engage in social comparisons when they are using this social media platform, which was found even when people were using this platform to create social connections or conduct social networking (Feinstein et al., 2013). In short, regardless of the way participants intended to utilize Facebook, they ran the risk of conducting negative social comparisons (Feinstein et al., 2013).

Social networking can be seen as a positive because it allows the user of the platform to create communities that can be used to find commonalities and express their ideas, however, according to this study, this can have a negative consequence as well. Once people are part of these online communities, they may begin to start comparing themselves to others within the group (Feinstein et al., 2013). This can lead people to start undergoing negative social comparisons, which can be associated with a higher rate of depression, indicating that the use of Facebook could be negative.

Negative Self-Esteem on Facebook

Furthermore, Facebook has also been linked to negative social comparison and self-esteem. In another study titled "Who Is at Risk on Facebook? the Effects of Facebook News Feed Photographs on Female College Students' Appearance Satisfaction" created by Kim and Park, examined social comparison in college-aged females (Kim and Park, 2016). The importance of this study, in my opinion, was not in studying the gender of the participants, but in how someone might view a peer who they deem more attractive than themselves (Kim and Park, 2016). This study highlights that the user's self-esteem before logging onto Facebook is a factor in how posted images will affect them (Kim and Park, 2016). Low self-esteem was found to be correlated to a higher risk of a negative social comparison, which in turn can exacerbate that already low confidence; this cycle of lowered self-regard affected users both on and off the social media platform (Kim and Park, 2016).

Furthermore, the study "Facebook False Self-Presentation Behaviors and Negative Mental Health" conducted by Wright and colleagues, found that when users lacked self-esteem, they were likely to continue using the platform, but did so in a dishonest way (Wright et al., 2018). The two distinct false self-presentation behaviors that were indicated in this study were

lying about themselves on posts and *liking* other posts (Wright et al., 2018). Both of these behaviors were used by participants to cover up for a lack of self-esteem (Wright et al., 2018). What was interesting about this article was the relationship of liking behaviors to mental health (Wright et al., 2018). While liking behaviors were related to depression, anxiety, and stress, lying behaviors were only related to anxiety (Wright et al., 2018).

Yet, both self-presentation behaviors showed signs of increasing negative mental health symptoms in participants (Wright et al., 2018). This has big implications in how we, as a society, interact with social media as a whole, not just Facebook. Creating a false image of ourselves on our social media platforms is related to negative mental health (Wright et al., 2018). This means that it is hard to pin down whether or not someone is being genuine or is just trying to hide the reality of how they feel from the world. Anyone using social media might fall into this trap of seeing posts of people seeming to enjoy the time of their life but in actuality, they could be hurting due to the negative mental health outcomes associated with using this platform (Wright et al., 2018).

Use of Instagram and Depression Rates

This association between negative mental health and the use of social media is not just isolated to Facebook. There are numerous articles about Instagram indicating its relationship to negative mental health effects once used.

Let us consider again “Instagram #Instasad?: Exploring Associations Among Instagram Use, Depressive Symptoms, Negative Social Comparison, and Strangers” by Lup and colleagues, this time focusing on negative effects on mental health (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). Their 117 participants between the ages of 18 and 29 completed online questionnaires that looked at

the relationship between depressive symptoms and the use of Instagram by measuring depression scores compared to the number of strangers followed by that user.

This study found that Instagram use was marginally positively associated with depressive symptoms in those who were using this social media platform, with the most significant indicator being the number of followers the individual had that were strangers to them (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). The more followers that were strangers was related to a higher degree of depressive symptoms, however, if the number of followers was mostly just acquaintances met in real life, the relationship was not as severe (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015).

This distinction between followers who are strangers and those who are real-life acquaintances is important to the functionality of this app, as Instagram runs on the intention that users will seek out "influencers", or strangers they find interesting or inspiring (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). The goal is that users will search for others they find intriguing or worth mimicking; these "influencers" are often people they don't know, which could lead to negative social comparisons or other factors of negative social media use (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015).

Negatives of Pictorial Content While Using Instagram

Instagram is unique to social media in that it was designed to be centralized around visual content. In the article "Exploring the Relationship Between Frequency of Instagram Use, Exposure to Idealized Images, and Psychological Well-Being in Women", authors Sherlock and Wagstaff looked at Instagram's pictorial content to understand how images affected those who use Instagram regularly (Sherlock and Wagstaff, 2019). This study did find that there was a relationship between viewing images that were deemed as beautiful or related to fitness and a decrease in the mental health (Sherlock and Wagstaff, 2019). This study, in particular, worked with 129 women who were first asked to complete a questionnaire that indicated how that

individual viewed themselves before the study, followed by viewing images, which was then assessed further with another questionnaire (Sherlock and Wagstaff, 2019).

Overall, the study found that before looking at the photos that were provided, individuals had higher self-esteem in regards to how they viewed themselves, however, once the images were shown, participants scored themselves lower in terms of their self-esteem, indicating an association between the photos they viewed and their decreased mental health (Sherlock and Wagstaff, 2019).

This is important when thinking about the main purpose of using Instagram. This social media platform has fostered a domain where users feel obligated to highlight only the "good" parts of themselves when cultivating their online image (Sherlock and Wagstaff, 2019). When other users view said content, they may forget how meticulously curated these representations are, causing them to engage in negative social comparisons, which subsequently decreases mental health. The severity of this phenomenon is dependent upon what images that individual chooses to see regularly: who they opt to follow (Sherlock and Wagstaff, 2019). This study specifically explored fitness and beauty as factors in photo content. Researchers found that individuals who followed an excess of these kinds of accounts would be more at risk of developing negative mental health effects than those who chose to view other content (Sherlock and Wagstaff, 2019). The aspect of viewing pictorial content relating to negative mental health outcomes is validated by this study.

Additionally,"Instagram Photos Reveal Predictive Markers of Depression", a study conducted by Reece and Danforth, looked at how certain images viewed by participants affected their mental health (Reece and Danforth, 2017). Studying 166 participants, the researchers looked specifically at markers of depression extracted from images of people posted to the

application itself (Reece and Danforth, 2017). This was done by using a face detection program to find out if people were able to spot signs of depression in photos, which was then compared to individuals looking for the same signs of depression in the photos presented (Reece and Danforth, 2017). The face detection program was better than the individual at finding markers of depression in the photos that were posted to the social media platform (Reece and Danforth, 2017).

This is important when regarding social comparison and the faces that people see through the pictorial content published (Reece and Danforth, 2017). When people are looking at content on the platform, they may not be fully understanding the implications of the images they are viewing or why they are seeking them out (Reece and Danforth, 2017). Through *upward social comparison*, we try to model ourselves after the people we are viewing in some way, in this case like a role model (Kim & Park, 2016). If subjects being viewed are expressing depressive emotions, and an individual is seeing a multitude of the images they perceive are positive, they would be causing themselves to lower their mental health in the process. There is more to the relationship between Instagram use and negative mental health effects than just how many people are followed; users must also consider whose content they choose to view and what those people are posting. Both factors relate to the decrease in the mental health of those on Instagram (Reece and Danforth, 2017).

Depressive Content on Instagram

Other studies regarding depressive content on Instagram as a whole found some interesting details that possibly can indicate Instagram being more conducive to negative content (Andalibi and Ozturk, 2015). In “Depression-related Imagery on Instagram”, authors Andalibi and Ozturk looked at the communities on Instagram that primarily revolve around depression

(Andalibi and Ozturk, 2015). These communities, which are generally composed of individuals who feel they exhibit symptoms of depression, aim to get help for their depressive symptoms (Andalibi and Ozturk, 2015).

These communities rely on visual elements to convey their message (Andalibi and Ozturk, 2015). In some cases, these images appear depressive in content, shedding light on how people with depression look or act, but the captions of these photos indicate that these individuals are looking for help, rather than sympathy (Andalibi and Ozturk, 2015). However, this is not always the case; some groups tend to foster and glorify the negative feelings associated with depression (Andalibi and Ozturk, 2015). Sometimes people use these communities to identify and fixate on their negative mental health symptoms without truly finding help, which only intensifies the problem (Andalibi and Ozturk, 2015).

In general, the more autonomous a person leaves their browsing on these platforms, meaning how to use the application as a whole, the higher the risk for negative mental health symptoms. This is also true with being too involved with social media platforms; spending extended periods of time on both Instagram and Facebook can correspond with negative mental health. Overall, using these social media platforms has a relationship to negative mental health, and requires more studies to truly understand the scope of this relationship.

How Social Media can Impact Mental Health

The Media Practice Model

While the last two chapters focused on relationships between social media and mental health, this chapter will be looking at how social media can directly impact mental health. To do this, the primary focus will be on a theoretical model that can help explain how social media can interact with mental health. The media practice model, which focuses on the role of media choices as influences on intentions and behaviors, will be used to explain how mental health can be impacted by social media use (Moreno and Whitehill, 2014).

The media practice model has three distinct features that make it different from other approaches to the topic of social media use (Brown, 2000). The first being that this model assumes is that most media use is active in a number of ways (Brown, 2000). This could be through selecting which medium and genre to consume, how to interact with and make sense of what is seen and/or heard, and by applying or rejecting some or all of what is consumed through the social media platform (Brown, 2000). The second aspect is the idea of the ongoing reciprocal nature of social media use and its effects on the individual consuming its content (Brown, 2000). Rather than a linear process of media affecting the consumer, the media practice model assumes that consumers play a role in how viewed media affects them (Brown, 2000). The third feature is that the model assumes that a media consumer's current and emerging sense of self is a component when consuming information on these platforms (Brown, 2000). Users make decisions about what media they interact with, what they consume, and how they apply this content to everyday life (Brown, 2000).

The study "Influence of Social Media on Alcohol Use in Adolescents and Young Adults", which was conducted by Moreno and Whitehill, looked at how participation in social

media is related to the media practice model (Moreno and Whitehill, 2014). In this study, the media practice model suggests that users seek out and explore information that may reinforce or affirm their already known ideas or behaviors (Moreno and Whitehill, 2014). In this study, the focus was on how social media use relating to the media practice model helps to reinforce alcohol consumption (Moreno and Whitehill, 2014).

Moreno and Whitehill found that there is a relationship between seeing images and content suggesting alcohol consumption and the desire to do so in real life (Moreno and Whitehill, 2014). This is significant when understanding how to use social media. This article does not suggest that there is no way to get around this influence. By understanding the media practice model, users can assess their habits concerning social media and control for negative behaviors that could lead to negative mental health effects.

The study "Using the Media Practice Model to Examine Dating Violence in Emerging Adults", written by McAuslan and colleagues, uncovered similar results to that of Moreno and Whitehill (McAuslan et al., 2018). The primary focus of this article was to look at dating violence in relation to media use (McAuslan et al., 2018). Specifically, the variable being addressed was the consumption of violent media content by users who are in a relationship (McAuslan et al., 2018). The authors of this study gathered 417 emerging adults, with 71% of these being female, who completed online surveys to assess early experiences, individual factors such as home life, media use, and attitudes towards violence, along with views on dating violence victimization/perpetration (McAuslan et al., 2018). In this study, the majority of participants experienced or perpetrated some type of dating violence (McAuslan et al., 2018).

What is important about this article is not the fact that using social media was related to either experiencing dating violence or perpetrating it, but rather that media consumption played a

role in influencing these types of behaviors (McAuslan et al., 2018). People who were either doing the action or experiencing the action were looking at this type of content which was influencing their behaviors (McAuslan et al., 2018). Young adults involved in dating violence were viewing violent content, but social media use itself was not the cause of these actions. By being cognizant of this distinction, individuals could start to change these behaviors by changing the content that they were viewing. The individual, for instance, could look for support groups through their social media platforms and find help for their behaviors or experiences.

The same results were found when looking at adolescents' sexual media diets in an article written by Brown titled "Adolescents' Sexual Media Diets" (Brown, 2000). This article expresses how the media practice model was a factor in the development of adolescents' contextual understandings of sexual progression (Brown, 2000). Through this model, Brown discovered that these individuals tend to select and react to sexual media diets that speak to their emerging sense of self as sexual beings (Brown, 2000). However, he found that this consumption of media was used to address sexual relationships in the real world, which could be either a positive or a negative in regards to mental health outcomes (Brown, 2000).

By looking at certain media platforms and content, people who are starting to become sexually active can do so in positive or negative ways based on the content that they chose to consume (Brown, 2000). If the content was positive, encouranging individuals to develop healthy actions when engaging in sexual acts, then the media practice model was used effectively to support positive mental health outcomes (Brown, 2000). However, if the opposite was to occur, then this could contribute to negative social patterns regarding sexual relationships (Brown, 2000). By understanding that social media use can affect the way people mature in their sexual lives, individuals have the opportunity to use their social media positively and effectively.

Again, this suggests that it is not social media that is at fault for what people might obtain in terms of negative behaviors, but to the person and how they are using their social media.

ASMU and PSMU

Building on our understanding of the media practice model, we can begin to examine other factors that are present in how users consume social media. Here, we consider how the effect of social media use on an individual can change whether they are active users or rather passive in their consumption of material (Albers et. al, 2019). *Passive use* of social media can be defined as using social media without commenting, posting, sharing or chatting on that social media platform (Albers et. al, 2019). This means that the person is merely scrolling through their news feed, looking at photos, videos, and status updates without interacting with it (Albers et. al, 2019). *Active use* can then be defined as interacting with social media by commenting, posting, and (seeking out influencers?) on top of the behaviors involved in passive use (Albers et. al, 2019).

In the study titled "Social Media and Depression Symptoms: A Network Perspective", researchers Albers and colleagues looked at the difference between passive and active social media usage on the depression scales of undergraduate psychology students (Albers et. al, 2019).

This study aimed to uncover whether one of these modes of consumption was more likely to be correlated with symptoms of depression (Aalbers et al., 2019). To test for this, researchers applied a network perspective to see the connections between the different variables they were testing, the network perspective. The variables in question were PSMU (passive social media use) and ASMU (active social media use) (Aalbers et al., 2019). Overall, they found that while participants who spent more time on social media with a PSMU style did experience higher mean levels of depressed mood, the network structure indicated that the only real connection

PSMU had was with ASMU (Aalbers et al., 2019). In short, social media use was connected to higher rates of depression among those who actively partake, however, this study did not find that social media use causes depression.

Looking closer at active social media use, “Adolescent Social Media Use and Mental Health From Adolescent and Parent Perspectives” by Barry and collegues is a study that looked at active social media use and its relationship to mental health in adolescents (Barry et al., 2017). This article found that when using social media actively, adolescents were more prone to have negative mental health effects, this was increased by how many social media platforms that these individuals were users of (Barry et al., 2017). Some of the symptoms recorded in this study were inattention, hyperactivity/impulsivity, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Barry et al., 2017).

It is important to note that this research did not account for the type of media content that was being consumed. This research aimed only to look at the effects of being active on social media in general. With that being said, there was a correlation found between being active on social media and having negative mental health outcomes. Another important factor that was mentioned in the article is that the more accounts that a person is active on increases the risk of developing more negative mental health symptoms (Barry et al., 2017). Overall, being active on social media increased the risk of developing negative mental health symptoms (Barry et al., 2017).

Yet, some clinicians in this area of research have come to different conclusions. By way of contrast, some studies have found that active social media use does not contribute to negative mental health outcomes. In “Passive and Active Social Media Use and Depressive Symptoms Among United States Adults”, Escobar-Viera and colleagues found that the relationship between

active social media use and passive social media use when compared to mental health is more complicated than it seems (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018).

This study looked at both of the previous social media usage patterns and found that active social media usage was not correlated to higher depression rates in those who were active consumers of social media (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). What they did find, however, was that passive social media use was a predictor for a higher risk of depression among those studied (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). The researchers attributed this to the fact that those who were passive on social media were already showing signs of depression (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). It is possible that their lower energy and decreased interest in daily activities lead to passive social media use (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). The depressive symptoms of an individual, according to the researchers, fits with the way passive social media use is conducted (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018).

The important fact to take away from this is that either active or passive social media usage can be linked to negative mental health outcomes. This indicates that it isn't the type of media usage that is the direct cause of mental health effects, but rather the state of being that individual is currently in when they are starting to consume media (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). If an individual is already depressed and they start to consume media, they may tend to be more passive in their social media use (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). This does not mean that social media caused this to happen, but rather, might be a way in which the symptoms are surfacing in the individual (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). By understanding this, people can learn to be more introspective in their social media use and see the signs indicating a mood shift which may help them choose how to interact with social media in general.

The main focus of this section was to point out that social media is not the direct cause of mental health issues related to media consumption. Rather, how people interact with the media is the primary consideration. By looking at the media practice model and passive versus active social media use, it becomes clear that emphasis has to be placed on the individual who is consuming social media to begin with. The blame for negative mental health outcomes can not be placed solely on social media platforms, but on how a person chooses to interact with the different platforms and how they bring it into their life.

Conclusion

Results

Social media use and mental health is an important discussion to engage in right now. With each day, we move closer to a society in which technology and social media presence is an essential part of daily life. In recognizing this, we must know how to interact with this technology in a healthy, positive way.

This paper aimed to highlight key features that relate mental health to the use of two important social media platforms, Instagram and Facebook. These platforms are two of the most prevalent social media platforms available to us today. By understanding how these platforms operate and how they affect us, we can better understand how to use them constructively and minimize the negative impacts that they may have.

In the first section of this paper, the primary focus was on the positive benefits that can be seen when using these social media platforms. The first key point mentioned in this section was the relationship between real-life events and the way social media can distance users from these if they are negative. While it is true that social media can be used as a distractor, the main element that needs to be addressed is that it is still up to the person using this platform to find these distractions. Along with that, it is also up to these users to seek out *positive* distractions that will lead to better mental health outcomes. If a person is finding distractions that are not positive, then they will not be getting better from their current situation. It is still up to these individuals to put in some introspective work to find the distractions that have a positive impact on them. This is also tied to the use of positive images or quotes found on these sites. Social media platforms themselves will not be able to control what an individual deems positive. The algorithms associated with these platforms will suggest media based on previously viewed or

searched content. This means that individuals have to be mindful of what they are viewing if they want the majority of their content to be positive for them. If they are searching at times for content that is negative for them, then the social media platform might show content that is related to these previously viewed posts. In this way, it is still up to the individual to be mindful of what content they want to view and continue viewing.

Overall, the main point of positive social media use is the active participation that an individual has with their social media consumption. When a person is not being mindful of what they are viewing, they might not get the results that they were looking for, which might create results that they did not anticipate. By not being mindful in the usage of these social media platforms, an individual might develop a relationship with their social media that fosters negative mental health outcomes.

The second section of this paper focused on negative relationships between mental health and social media. The primary way in which these relationships were formed was not through understanding the implications that certain content might have. While many articles written on the negative impact of social media on an individual's mental health tend to focus on the amount of time spent on the platform or the number of platforms used, they leave out some crucial elements that might have influenced their findings.

Increased time spent on social media does not necessarily mean that an individual is going to be subjected to negative outcomes,regardless of social media platform. Since it has been observed that positive relationships have been formed through social media use, it is not equated to negative mental health effects. If an individual is cognizant of what they are consuming, then time spent on that platform may not hold much significance. They will still develop a negative relationship between social media use and mental health. Increased time spent on social media

may indeed exacerbate already-present negative effects, but this is largely dependent upon how the user curates their content

This same reasoning may be applied to cases in which the individual is consuming social media on multiple platformsWhile articles cited in this paper have established that there is a correlation between increased negative mental health symptoms and number of platforms used, the individual still holds the power in choosing what content they want to see

Algorithms employed by all social media platforms are designed to “learn” what an individual is viewing, and the goal is to show users more of content an individual tends to interact with . If a user is not mindful of the harmful content they are viewing and interacting with, they will inevitably see similar noxious content. Individuals must make a consistent effort to teach these algorithms to show them healthy, positive media. These algorithms are powerful tools that users must learn to use to their advantage.

The relationships formerly stated in this paper may then be further evaluated by viewing social media use through the lens of the media practice model, and subsequently analyzed in the contexts of active social media use versus passive social media use. Specifically in the cases of Facebook and Instagram, a clear understanding of these models can lead individuals to be more aware of the way they use their social media.

The media practice model is the primary way in which a person can better understand how to work with the content that they are consuming. The media practice model focuses on the role of media choices as influences on intentions and behaviors which can be used to explain how mental health can be dictated by social media use (Moreno and Whitehill, 2014). What needs to be understood about this model is that the information is to be blamed for the effects that it has caused to the individual who is consuming it. There also needs to be an understanding

that what a person ingests on social media has effects in the real world; content viewed shapes the mindset of the individual viewing it. People need to be mindful of this fact and understand what they are looking at and how it is taken into the real world through them. If people can better understand this model, then individuals might be able to shift their focus to being more mindful, and therefore create a relationship with their social media that fosters positive mental health outcomes.

This understanding is how active and passive social media use is linked to the media practice model. A person can be active or passive in their social media use as long as they understand the connection between the content and their life. Once this is understood, the shift to a more mindful practice of social media use can take place. This can then lead to another shift in the relationship between social media and positive mental health outcomes.

In conclusion, as a society that is relying more on the technology we possess to keep us in contact with the world, we have been losing a sense of mindfulness. By better understanding the connection that social media has on our lives and how to use these tools effectively, better mental health associations can be made when using these platforms. So go ahead, use Instagram and Facebook, but understand why and how it affects you and what you can do to change it so that it does so in a positive light for the future.

Continuation

While the studies that were examined in this paper provided detailed information, they did not provide a full scope of the benefits or negatives to social media use. There is a lot of work to be done to better understand where to continue from this point.

First, the studies that looked at the way social media use was associated with benefits or negatives to mental health looked at predominantly younger populations. There is something to

be said about hitting a demographic, but these articles were missing other age groups that might provide more data on the subject. To better understand how social media is associated with mental health there needs to be research done on all ages that are using social media to get a conclusive result on the subject.

While these results also came from multiple countries, they seemed to all be western. This begs the question of what differences would occur when the same studies were given to other cultures. Just like age, to better understand the effects of social media use, there needs to be more research done on cultural associations with media as well.

Overall, the studies have done a good job providing details to work into this paper, but for the field of psychology to truly understand the effects of social media more, work needs to be done.

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