

Exploring the impact of social media on college student mental health and wellbeing

Federica Violi

University of Illinois at Chicago, USA, Email: federicavioli13@gmail.com

The increase of complex mental health issues is emerging as an immediate concern around the world. Over 1.1 billion people worldwide experience mental illness or a mental health disability, and one in four people are affected by various mental health challenges. Research shows an increase in major depressive episodes among adolescents from 8.7% in 2005 to 11.3% in 2014 and from 8.8% to 9.6% among young adults. This subset of the population is representative of many college students, positioning mental health as a major concern for universities. At the same time, society is facing an outstanding advancement of mobile technology and social media, and corporations can take advantage of particular social marketing strategies in order to maximize their quantity, quality and usage among teens and young adults. This review aims to analyze and summarize the literature on the impact of social media on mental health, and consider the wellbeing measures of depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness. A systematic literature search was performed using different databases, including: PubMed/Medline, PMC, Science Direct/Elsevier, EMBASE, with inclusion criteria of papers published after 2015.

Numerous studies identify connections between social media use and negative outcomes such as increased depression, anxiety, compulsive behavior, loneliness, and narcissism. The burgeoning use of social media by young adults raises concerns about these possible negative effects of its use. If social media use can be linked to negative outcomes, researchers need to devote more attention to understanding factors associated with negative mental health outcomes and how to assuage these outcomes.

A Croatian study (Pantic et al., 2012) found that time spent on Facebook by high school students was positively correlated with depression. These findings were mirrored by Rosen et al. (2013), who found that participants who spent more time online and those who performed more Facebook image management evidenced more clinical symptoms of major depression. A study of American university students found that more intense Facebook use predicted increased loneliness, college students who reported having higher numbers of Facebook friends experienced lower emotional adjustment to college life. Further, the same study found that college students who spent more time on Facebook reported having lower self-esteem than those who spent less time.

Early onset of psychiatric problems is concerning because it predicts a more severe, chronic, and

recurrent form of the issue (Zarate, 2010). For example, individuals with Major Depressive Disorder in young adulthood spend an average of a decade of their lives with the illness. Besides heightening the likelihood of lifelong illness, young adult mental health issues also affect brain development and function. Early onset depression (age 17-23) is linked to abnormal brain development, resulting in a reduced volume of the prefrontal cortex, an enlarged amygdala, and a reduced hippocampus (Zarate, 2010). In addition, Burt and Masten (2010) noted that mental illness at the critical period of emerging adulthood can lead to lifelong disability by eroding the individual's ability to develop socially, occupationally, and educationally. The mental health risks faced by young adults point to the importance of examining variables that could contribute to these mental health concerns.

One idea that may explain how the sedentary behaviors encouraged by social media affect mental health is that of displacement. People who spend more time in sedentary behaviors (like social media use) have less time for face-to-face social interaction and physical activity, both of which have been proven to be protective against mental disorders (Martinsen, 2008; Teychenne et al., 2008). According to displacement theory, it is not the social media use in and of itself that has deleterious effects on mental health, but rather the absence of other activities.

Umberson and Montez (2010) note that throughout history, captors have used social isolation to torture prisoners of war—to drastic effect. Social isolation of otherwise healthy, well-functioning individuals results in psychological and physical disintegration, and even death. Adults who are more socially connected are healthier and live longer than their more isolated peers (Umberson & Montez, 2010).

The theories reviewed in the previous section offer explanatory value in the relationship between social media and mental health. By focusing on several individual- and social- level theories, this thesis was able to illuminate how complex this relationship is. The theories discussed seem to offer insight into the complex connections between social media use and mental health, implying that several of the social and individual theories discussed may play a role in creating the connection between young adult mental health and social media use.

From our review, we found a positive correlation between social media use and the presence of mental health challenges, as well as a positive correlation between social media networking and higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among teens. The literature demonstrates that social networking behaviors may result in decreased loneliness.

Our review revealed inconsistent findings regarding social

media use and the wellbeing measures of depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness. The evidence supports a correlation between social media use and wellbeing measures, which validates the importance of the topic.