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Social Media Dependency and College Student Adjustment

By

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Psychology

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science In the HTC Honors College at Coastal Carolina University

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Authors note

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Abstract

While previous studies have looked at the effects of social media dependency on disordered eating symptoms, body image concerns, and anxiety and depression symptoms, few have looked at these effects on exclusively college students. The current study utilized a survey to examine the associations between social media dependency, disordered eating symptoms, body image concerns, and anxiety and depression symptoms. Ninety-seven college students ($M_{age} = 18.8$ years, SD = 1.51; 82.5% young women; 17.5% young males; 75.3% White; 91.8% non-Hispanic/non-Latinx) completed established measures, and reported on their social media dependency (Xanidis & Brignell, 2016), body image concerns (Schaefer, Burke, Thompson, et. al., 2015), disordered eating symptoms (Breines, et. Al., 2014), and anxiety and depression symptoms (Fajkowska & Wytykowska, 2018). Findings indicated that higher social media dependency was associated with higher body image concerns and higher disordered eating symptoms, but lower depression and anxiety symptoms. Further research, however, is needed to more strongly identify higher levels of social media dependency as causes of body image concerns and disordered eating symptoms, and to clarify the associations between social media dependency, anxiety, and depression.

Social Media Use and College Student Adjustment

In the past decade, social media use has exponentially increased, especially among adolescents. For instance, the average young person now spends approximately seven hours a day connected to electronic media (Rideout et al. 2010), and the average U.S. 12th grader spent six hours per day on social media in 2016, which is about double the time spent in 2006 (Twenge et. Al., 2019). The popularity of online socializing has prompted researchers to question its influence on mental health (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). This is unfortunate because one of the most rapid phases of human development occurs during adolescence (Muzaffar, et. Al.., 2018). As adolescents and young adults move toward developing cohesive self-identities, they typically engage in greater levels of social comparison and interpersonal feedback-seeking (Harter 2012). Likely heightening the impact of social media use on adjustment during this developmental period. To begin to address this issue, the current study sought to examine the relationship between social media use and psychological adjustment, including depression, anxiety, and disordered eating symptoms in college students.

Controversy abounds regarding social networking sites (SNS) impact on mental health (Twenge, 2017). For example, some studies have found that higher levels of social media use, especially at night, among adolescents was found to be associated with greater levels of depression (e.g., Woods & Scott, 2016). Yet, recent research has suggested that how a users' mental health is affected depends to a large extent on how social media are used (Burke & Kraut, 2016; Seabrook, et. Al., 2016) and particular online behaviors (Feinstein et al., 2013). Previous research has found that increased use of online social media platforms may have a negative

impact on health by promoting unhealthy body-focused ideals, behaviors, and inaccurate health-behavior recommendations aimed at manipulating ones body (Rodgers, et. Al., 2016). It has been found that internet use primarily spent on sites such as Facebook is associated with lower levels of weight satisfaction, increased drive for thinness, and greater levels of internalizing thin ideals and appearance comparison (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Still other findings have indicated that excessive social media use may cause or exacerbate mental health problems (Kohler, Turner, and Webster, 2020), that might include depression, anxiety, body image issues, and disordered eating behaviors.

Social comparison theory addresses how humans are highly motivated to evaluate their own social and personal worth based on how they compare themselves to others on dimensions such as intelligence, physical appearance, eating habits, and life success (Zimmer-Gembeck et. Al., 2020). These comparisons are often with their peers and can be either upwards or downwards. While a downward social comparison involves comparing oneself with inferior people in order to maintain positive views of oneself, an upwards social comparison with superior people can serve as a means for self-improvement (Chae, 2018). Upwards social comparison can be dangerous though, because one's positive self-image can be threatened, and this can lead to envy towards the comparison target.

Popular social networking sites include Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. People use Instagram for multiple reasons, including archiving, escapism, self-expression, social interaction, creativity, coolness, documentation, and surveillance to gain_knowledge of others (i.e., peeking or lurking; Lee, et. Al., 2015). With these positive uses comes negative uses as well. Social comparison theory states that when people encounter others (real, imagined, or in the media)

who they perceive to be better than them on a relevant or important dimension (fitness, attractiveness), it threatens their sense of self-worth and often produces anxiety, frustration, or other negative feelings (Kohler, et. Al., 2020). Further identified potential negative effects on well-being include the promotion of stress (Meier, et. Al., 2016), loneliness (Liu & Baumeister, 2016), and depression symptoms (Appel, at. Al., 2016).

Approximately 5–9% of adolescents are clinically depressed (Goldfield et al. 2016) and one in four have experienced a depressive episode by the end of adolescence (Hoare et al. 2016). It has also been found that women are twice as likely as men to experience depressive episodes (Hankin et al. 2007). Thus, examining the impact of social media on the adjustment of adolescents and young adults is critical.

Currently, research on social media use and depression indicates that the association between social media use and depression varies (Forchuk, et. Al., 2020). Whereas many studies have found that social media use is associated with higher levels of depression symptoms (Aalbers, et. Al., 2010; Bányai, et. Al., 2016; Davila, et. Al., 2012), other studies have indicated that increased social media use may not be positively correlated with depression symptoms (Jelenchick, et. Al., 2013; Brailovskaia, et. Al., 2016).

It has also been found that increased Facebook use is associated with increased anxious arousal symptoms (Muzaffar, et. Al., 2018). For example, it has been found that a single tweet can increase anxiety symptoms. When the Hawaii missile alert was sent on Twitter, users anxiety increased 3.4% every 15 minutes during the alert period, until the all-clear was transmitted (Jones & Silver, 2020). However, whether social media use causes anxiety, or anxious

personality traits drive more social media use is still open for debate. Another study has found that problematic social media use in adolescents is correlated with both neuroticism and trait anxiety (Kohler, et. Al., 2020), which are personality traits that are not easily altered.

Whereas many research studies have determined a link between social media and disordered eating behaviors, very little has been found out about social media and disordered eating behaviors specifically in college students. The majority of research done has focused on Facebook and its links to disordered eating behaviors and mental health struggles. Some preliminary findings indicate that Facebook use was associated with greater disordered eating behavior (Mabe, et. Al., 2014). It has also been found that negative body image is linked to eating disorders, which is heightened by social media's demand for a "perfect" body (Barth & Starkman, 2016). Additionally, a correlational study of young women found that following appearance focused accounts on Instagram positively related to negative outcomes, such as increased thin-ideal internalization, body surveillance, and drive for thinness (Cohen, et. Al., 2017). Other studies have also found that Instagram use in general was related to increased self-objectification and greater exposure to fitspiration—fitness inspiration—photos in particular related to greater body image concerns (Fardouly, et. Al., 2018).

Social comparison theory may play a role in why social media use might be related to disordered eating and body image difficulties. As previously mentioned, upward social comparison can threaten ones positive self-image. For those viewing social media accounts focusing on thinspiration- internet-based information conveying unhealthy weight control or body manipulation behaviors (Quesnel, et. Al., 2017)- they may see their own bodies as inferior

to those they are viewing. This, in turn, may lead to disordered eating and body image difficulties.

The aim of the current study is to replicate and extend these findings. Most college students tend to use more than just Facebook as a social networking site. There is little to no prior research of the effects that sites such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter have on college students. By using previous studies and measures, the current study sought to determine the association between use of these aforementioned sites on college students disordered eating behavior, body image concerns, and anxiety and depression symptoms in college students. It is anticipated that increased social media use will be associated with increased disordered eating symptoms, increased body image issues, and increased anxiety and depression symptoms.

Method

Participants

The current study will include 97 participants enrolled in psychology programs at Coastal Carolina University. Participants are college aged, ranging in age from 18 to 22 years old (M_{age} = 18.8 years, SD = 1.51). Of the 97 participants, 82.5% were young women while 17.5% were young males. 75.3% of the participants identified as White, while 91.8% of participants identified as non-Hispanic/non-Latinx. All participants were recruited through an online survey platform, Sona Systems.

Measures

Social media use

To measure social media use, participants completed the 9-item Social Media Use Questionnaire (SMUQ: Xanidis & Brignell, 2016). Participants responded to all items on a 5-

option response scale, ranging from 0 = Never to 4 = Always. The questionnaire measures withdrawal (e.g., "I feel anxious when I am not able to check my social media account") and compulsion (e.g., "I spend a large portion of the day using SNS") to determine social media use. Composite social media use scores were created for each participant by calculating the mean of each participant's scores on the items composing this scale. The internal reliability of the composite social media use scale was adequate in the current study ($\alpha = .86$).

Body image

Body image was measured by using the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (Schaefer, et. Al., 2015). The questionnaire uses questions such as "I want my body to look very thin" and "I feel pressure from the media to look thinner" to determine a participant's image of their body. Participants responded to the 22-item questionnaire using a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Definitely Disagree to 5 = Definitely Agree. Composite body image scores were created for each participant by calculating the mean of each participant's scores on the items composing this scale. The internal reliability of the composite body image scale was adequate in the current study ($\alpha = .92$).

Disordered eating behaviors

Participants also completed the Disordered Eating Behaviors Scale (Breines, et. Al., 2014). Participants were asked to rate statements (e.g., "Tried to control your weight by eating little or no food") using a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Composite disordered eating behaviors scored were created for each participant by calculating the mean of

each participant's scores on the items composing this scale. The internal reliability of the composite disordered eating behaviors scale was adequate in the current study ($\alpha = .86$).

Anxiety and depression

Anxiety and depression were both measured using the Anxiety and Depression Questionnaire- Anehedonic Depression (Fajkowska, et. Al., 2018). This questionnaire is composed of 64 items that are rated either 1 = Agree or 2 = Disagree. A composite score for anxiety and depression was created separately for each participant by calculating the mean of each participant's scores on the items composing this subscale. The internal reliability of the composite anxiety and depression subscale was adequate in the current study ($\alpha = .68$).

Procedure

A correlational design was utilized in the current study. Data were collected from participants individually during the fall semester using Sona Systems. Before beginning the current study, participants read and signed an informed consent. Over the course of four weeks, participants completed the study online. Participants completed each section before moving onto to the next. Each participant spent roughly 20 minutes completing the study, and were awarded ½ credit in Sona Systems for their time and participation. After completing the current study, participants read a debriefing form.

Results

On average, participants reported low social media dependence ratings (M = 1.76 see Table 1). Rates of body image concerns (M = 2.5 see Table 1) and disordered eating behaviors

were relatively moderate (M = 2.3 see Table 1), as were anxiety and depression symptoms (M = 1.6 see Table 1).

To determine if increased social media use was associated with disordered eating behavior, body image concerns, and anxiety and depression symptoms, a few correlational analyses were performed. The bivariate correlation between social media use and disordered eating symptoms indicated that there was a statistically significant relationship (r = .40, p < .001 see Table 2). This correlation indicated that higher levels of social media use was associated with higher levels of disordered eating behaviors. In the second bivariate correlation conducted between social media use and body image issues, it was also found that there was a statistically significant relationship between the two variables (r = .43, p < .001 see Table 2). This indicates that higher levels of social media use was associated with body image difficulties. Finally, the bivariate correlation conducted between social media use and depression and anxiety symptoms found that there was a statistically significant relationship between the two variables (r = .40, p < .001 see Table 2). Inconsistent with expectations however, this correlation indicated that higher levels of social media use were associated with less anxiety and depression.

Discussion

Consistent with expectations, higher body image concerns were associated with higher social media dependency as well as higher disordered eating behaviors. These findings are consistent with the previous literature regarding social media use and unhealthy behaviors, which revealed that excessive social media use may cause or exacerbate mental health problems (Kohler, et. Al., 2020). These findings are also supported by social comparison theory,

specifically upward social comparison. The more time people spent on social media viewing photos of those that they see as superior to them, the lower their self-image might have become. This, in turn, can lead to envy towards the comparison target, but could also serve as a means for self-improvement. As social media dependency in participants increased, body image concerns and disordered eating symptoms increased as well.

Inconsistent with expectations, social media dependency and anxiety and depression symptoms were negatively correlated. In the current study, as social media dependency increased, anxiety and depression symptoms decreased. Though some research has indicated social media use is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression (Muzaffar, et. Al., 2018), other findings are less consistent. Thus, the current findings are not completely inconsistent with past research. For instance, one study reported social anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, and general distress were not associated with Facebook behavior (Muzaffar, et. Al., 2018). It is possible that social media dependency does not relate to all aspects of anxiety and depression. Thus, more research is needed to examine anxiety and depression symptoms that may be brought on by an increased social media dependency. The current study utilized a measure that provided a single, combined indicator of depression and anxiety, whereas previous studies have utilized separate measures to measure depression and anxiety symptoms (Padilla-Walker, et. Al., 2020; Glaser, et. Al., 2018).

While the current study has the potential to add to the existing literature, there are a few limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings and planning future studies. First, these findings are based on a specific sample (i.e., students in psychology courses at a

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university in the southeastern United States). Additional studies using a range of diverse college students are warranted to assess the generalizability of these observations. Second, given the correlational design of the current study, the causal associations between variables cannot be inferred. To better determine the causal nature of the associations between social media dependency, body image concerns, and disordered eating symptoms, experimental research is required. For example, an experimental study could be conducted by altering the amount of time two groups spend on social media. One group could spend larger amounts of time on social media per day than the other group. Body image issues, disordered eating symptoms, and anxiety and depression symptoms can be determined before the study begins, and at various intervals throughout the study. Third, the current study broadly assessed social media dependency. Future studies should determine if one social networking site leads to more body image concerns, disordered eating symptoms, and anxiety and depression symptoms than others.

As mentioned previously, the current study does have limitations. Despite these limitations, the current study has strengths and advances the literature. As previous studies have found, social media dependency is associated with body image concerns, and disordered eating symptoms. The current study advances these findings within a certain age range (i.e. 18 years old to 22 years old). This study is also one of the only studies to examine the effects of social media dependency on college students

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Table 1 *Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables*

	Overall <i>M</i>	Overall <i>SD</i>
Social Media Use	1.76	.75
Body Image Concerns	2.50	.85
Disordered Eating Behaviors	2.35	.82
Depression and Anxiety Symptoms	1.61	.11

Table 2Bivariate Correlation Between Study Variables

	1	2	3	4
1. Social Media Use	-		1	1
2. Body Image Concerns	.431*	-		
3. Disordered Eating Behaviors	.4*	.68*	-	
4. Depression and Anxiety Symptoms	355*	489 [*]	296*	-

Note: * = Significant at .05 level