

## University Students' Mental Health in the Age of Social Media: A Sociological Perspective

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### **Abstract**

*This study analyzed the relationship between the use of social media and students' mental health, and its impact on them. Using existing literature, a comprehensive review was utilized to investigate the ways in which social media platforms affect students. Analysis reveals that excessive use of social media is associated with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.*

*The analysis explores the sociological factors that contribute to the impact of social media on mental health and social isolation, including the role of social comparison, peer pressure, and the commodification of relationships. Recommendation include, universities implementing mental health resources and support services to address social media-related concerns and policy makers developing social media policies and guidelines to promote responsible usage.*

**Key words:** *Social media, Mental health, Social isolation, Students, Sociological analysis*

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### **Introduction**

Technology has transformed the conditions and standards of activities of daily living of individuals and groups globally. In contemporary societies, social media has become a vital part of daily living for most people and its usage is increasing rapidly and has become dominant in the lives of people. In recent years, concerns about mental health and social isolation among university students have grown (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013; Lipson, Kern, Eisenberg, & Breland-Noble, 2018), especially among undergraduate students who are mostly young adults. They are among the most active users of social media, with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat (Mushtaq, & Benraghda, 2018). There are academic demands to cope with, new social

environments, and increased independence when away from home (Arnett, 2006). These are challenging, as many students struggle to adjust to this new life.

According to Jackson, Von Eye, Barbatsis, Biocca, Zhao & Fitzgerald (2003), changes from a familiar environment into an unfamiliar one represents a period of disequilibrium. Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert (2009) opined that it is astonishing the number of undergraduate students that use social media. They explained that majority of college students have active social media accounts and regularly spend large amount of time on these sites. Research has connected the use of social media to higher levels of anxiety, loneliness, and depressive symptoms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Burke, Marlow & Lento, 2010). Tiggemann & Anderberg, (2020) assert that social media sites present, carefully selected highlight reels, of the lives of peers, which can lead to erroneous perceptions of reality and unreasonable comparisons. Moreover, the never-ending flow of data may cause emotions of exhaustion, alienation, and can be overwhelming (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010). However, Taddicken, (2014) affirmed that social media can also present chances for assistance, community development, and connections. The goal of this paper is to expound on the nuanced relationship between university students' use of social media and their mental health outcomes.

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Media**

Social media depict online tools and platforms that allow people communicate with each other, produce content, share information and materials. There are a lot of social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn which are used for different purposes (Segado-Boj, Díaz-Campo, Fernández-Gómez & Chaparro-Domínguez, 2019). There are also sites where users can share photos and videos, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2019). Additionally, others include Discord, Reddit, online communities and forums, blogging and microblogging platforms, such as Tumblr and WordPress (Tiidenberg, Hendry, & Abidin, 2021). Social media at the moment plays a crucial role in young adults' everyday lives. It is an important part of contemporary youth culture because of its broad adoption and frequent use, affecting their identity construction, communication, and information access (Gennaro & Miller, 2021). It offers platforms for worldwide interaction, communication, and self-expression. It has completely changed how people communicate, exchange information, and relate to content. It has provided opportunity for people to connect with friends, family, and even completely unrelated individuals online and take part in an array of social activities (Chayko, 2012). Social media has both positive and negative impact on the society. Individuals can be affected by online behaviors, communication processes, information sharing, and mental health challenges.

Smith & Storrs (2023), contend that social media is any online platform that allows people to create, share, and exchange ideas, contents, and information within online communities and networks. This includes all digital channels, such as YouTube, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok. They explained that social media offers platforms for worldwide interactions, communication, and self-expression. It is a means for interfaces among people, that

allows them to create, share, exchange information and ideas through mobile phones and/or computer networks, popularly referred to as virtual networking.

Social media has changed how people communicate, exchange information, and interact with contents and each other. People can now connect and take part in a variety of social activities with friends, family, and strangers online (Chayko, 2012). Globally, this has changed how people engage and communicate with one another. A large number of features and functionalities offered by social media platforms enable diverse types of communication, such as text messages, photographs, videos, and live streaming (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2019). According to Pew Research Center reports in 2019, social media use, is nearly universal among teens and young adults between the ages of 13 to 18-year-olds, and these teens and young adults uses at least one out of the seven major online platforms, spending about nine hours each day on one or more of the platforms.

### **Mental Health and Students**

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as emotional, psychological, and social well-being that influences students' cognition, perception, and behavior. This allows each student to recognize his or her strengths, cope with the regular demands of life, and thereby work productively and fruitfully in the society. The report stated that mental health impacts how a student manages stress, interpersonal connections, and decision-making.

The absence of recognizing the above concept can lead to social disorder. Especially, in a situation where an individual's capacity to feel, think, and act in ways that could help to achieve a better quality of life, while respect for personal, social, and cultural boundary is tampered with (Manwell, Barbic, Roberts, Durisko, Lee, Ware & McKenzie, 2015). Similarly, Coyne, Rogers, Zurcher, Stockdale & Booth (2020) described mental disorder as any health issues that impact and alter cognitive functioning, emotional responses, and behaviors, associated with discomfort and/or reduce proper functioning of the individual. The inference is that lifestyle factors including nutrition, exercise, stress, substance misuse, and social connections and interactions all have an impact on mental health. In Nigeria, students face numerous challenges that affect their academic feat, well-being, and overall development. These challenges arise from various socio-economic factors and structural issues, which became more apparent recently from social media (Beyari, 2023).

### **The Nexus between Social Media and Metal Health**

Social media can have both positive and negative impact on university students' mental health. Research has shown that social media has so many advantages to various category of users. Among the various users include university students who can gain from the numerous advantages that social media offers from its usage. Some of such advantages include:

- i. *Social media and connectivity provision:* Social media and technology offer the world greater convenience in connectivity. Many students are away from family and friends for the first time when they are enrolled into the university (Best, Manktelow & Taylor 2014). Social media provides opportunity for students to connect to their families and friends as they are important to them. Similarly, social media can offer a sense of belonging and

connection for students who find it difficult to form relationships on campus (Taddicken, 2014).

- ii. *Access to resources:* Social media can provide access to mental health resources, support groups, and therapy sessions (Phillips, 2020).
- iii. *Self-expression and creativity:* Social media can be a platform for self-expression and creativity, which can be beneficial to mental health service users (Gilliland, Windle, Grunbaum, Yancey, Hoelscher, Tortolero, & Schuster, 2007).
- iv. *Stress relief:* According to Kirschner & Karpinski (2010), social media can provide stress relief for students, which can serve as a healthy distraction from academic stress and anxiety for them.
- v. *Support network:* Social media can provide students with support networks and online friendships with people outside their physical reach (Sinanan, & Gomes, 2020).
- vi. *Coping Skills:* Research have shown that social media can provide students with coping skills and strategies for managing mental health, as they are able to get tips on coping skills from the internet, if the need arises (Demirtepe-Saygili, 2020).
- vii. *Academic support and resources:* According to Hirschfeld (2018) social media can provide students with academic support and resources, that will help to reduce the students' academic stress.
- viii. *Communication process:* It has been observed that social media can offer students a means to communicate their emotions and feelings with people online, even with strangers. This provides emotional expression support (Gao, Jia, Zhao, & Zhang, 2019).
- ix. *Counselling services:* University students can access counselling services, and therapy sessions from social media (Stoll, Ziegele & Quiring, 2020).

Additional advantages include quick access to information and research, payment of bill and banking services at fingertips, online learning, job skills and content discovery such as YouTube.

### **The Drawbacks of Social Media Usage**

The internet is the center of the revolutionary link (Schmitt, Sims-Giddens, & Booth, 2012), as people have little or no influence over technological progress. This change poses hazards that causes chaos and pain. Some potential disadvantages of social media to students include:

- i. *Social media is addictive:* When you play a game or complete a chore, you want to do it as good as possible. When you are able to achieve what you want/need, your brain releases dopamine and other happiness hormones, which makes you happy (Gao, Jia, Zhao, & Zhang, 2019). Similar method is used when uploading a photo to Instagram or Facebook.

When numerous alerts for likes and nice remarks appear on screen, individuals unconsciously recognize them as rewards. This encourages constant checks on media so one does not miss out on current events, which can trigger social anxiety. Additionally, increased usage or time spent on social media can lead to cyberbullying, social anxiety and depression (Lam, Jensen, Hovey & Roley-Roberts, 2022). Moreover, incessant use of social media can create confusion for individual member about online versus reality.

- ii. *Unrealistic comparisons and competition:* Student's usage of social media could nurture unrealistic comparisons and competition among them. This can lead to decreased self-esteem, which can affect their overall mental well-being (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).
- iii. *Distractions:* According to Kirschner & Karpinski (2010). The excessive usage of social media can lead to decreased attention span and reduced academic performance.
- iv. *Online harassment and bullying:* Social media usage can be a platform for online harassment, which can have negative mental health effects on students (Abarna, Sheeba, Jayasrilakshmi, & Devaneyan, 2022). Abarna et al., (2022) opined that social media platform can be for bullying and harassment, and this is referred to as cyber bullying. This can impact negatively on students' mental health.
- v. *Less sleep:* The inappropriate usage of social media and constant notifications can interfere with sleep patterns, which could lead to sleep disturbances and related mental health issues on the user, including students (Cain & Gradisar, 2010).
- vi. *Less physical interaction:* The excessive usage of social media can lead to decreased face-to-face interactions, leading to social isolation (Primack, Shensa, Sidani, Whaite, Yi Lin, Rosen, & Miller, 2017). Although, many students are constantly connected online, most of these students still experience feelings of loneliness, disconnection, and isolation.
- vii. *Unrealistic expectations:* Social media usage can perpetuate unrealistic expectations and promote unattainable standards of beauty and success, especially for young people (Franchina, & Lo Coco, 2018).

Overall, mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, have become increasingly prevalent among university students. Mental health concerns and social isolation have also become pressing issues among young adults, aged 18-29 (Lipson et al., 2018).

### **Sociological Theories and Social Media**

Social Comparison Theory is utilized in this study. Festinger, (1957) explained that social comparison theory, states that there is a drive within individuals to look outside their visuals, in order to evaluate their own opinions and abilities. These images may be of physical reality or may be in comparison to other people. They stated that human beings have a drive to evaluate themselves by examining their opinions and abilities in comparison to others. This implies that

social media platforms showcase curated highlight reels of peers' lives, fostering unrealistic comparisons that might decrease self-esteem and foster comparison and competition among persons.

The sociological implications of social comparison on students' mental well-being are multifaceted. It not only affects individuals' self-perception and self-esteem but also contributes to the formation of social norms and expectations. Research has indicated that exposure to idealized and unrealistic body images on social media can contribute to body dissatisfaction, body comparison, and the development of negative body image perceptions (Perloff, 2014).

### **Findings and Implication**

The inappropriate and excessive use of social media could result in stress, social isolation, social withdrawal and depression, causing students to feel disconnected from others and lacking a support system. Stress and depression can create overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and helplessness which can affect the mental health of students, that can further lead to suicidal ideations, that could become a risk to students taking decisions to end their lives.

### **Conclusion**

Internet use has an advantageous and negative impact on university students' mental health. While social media can foster a sense of connection and community, excessive use can lead to students' comparison which can have detrimental mental health consequences. It is therefore essential for university students to be mindful of their frequent use of social media and to utilize it in manners that encourage positive mental health. Furthermore, social media can have an immense effect on students' mental health, resulting to increased stress, anxiety, and despair. Excessive social media use can result in inaccurate comparisons and a distorted picture of reality, lowering self-esteem and worth. Furthermore, social media can alter sleep patterns and aggravate feelings of loneliness and isolation. Understanding the link between social media and mental health can help students and instructors promote responsible use and help to support their overall well-being.

### **Recommendations**

- University students can limit their social media usage to fewer hours every day. This can be achieved by encouraging students to engage in offline and extracurricular activities to foster meaningful connections and reduce hours spent alone.
- Students should use social media to interact with others and express their emotions and experiences, rather than comparing themselves to others.
- Universities should offer students information and support to help them regulate their social media use and promote good mental health.
- When assessing and treating university students with mental health issues, mental health providers should evaluate their usage of social media.
- Universities should promote media literacy programs to critically evaluate social media contents.
- Policy makers should develop social media policies and guidelines to promote responsible usage of social media.



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