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# Effects of Social Media on Self-Image of Emerging Adults

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Effects of Social Media on Self-Image of Emerging Adults

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a working draft of a project in progress.

### Abstract

This project extends previous research on social media and self-image and focuses on the developmental phase of emerging adulthood. We measured individuals' reports of feeling of being in the emerging adult developmental period, their self-concept clarity and ethnic identity, and their used of social media for self-presentation and comparison with others. An online questionnaire was administered to participants who were in the age group of emerging adulthood (18-25 years). Results indicate that those who were in strong agreement that this was a time of experimentation and that this was a time of feeling "in-between" had greater clarity about their self-concept; that some aspects of social media use are related to some aspects of ethnic identity during emerging adulthood; and that some parameters of social media use are related to some dimensions of emerging adulthood. Results of this study provide further clarification about relations between social media use and the development of self-image during emerging adulthood.

*Keywords: emerging adulthood, social media use, ethnic identity, self-concept clarity*

### Effects of Social Media on Self-Image of Emerging Adults

Emerging adulthood is a newly proposed developmental period that goes from approximately the late teens through the mid-twenties, focusing on ages between 18 and 25 years old. Theory and research suggest that emerging adulthood is a distinct period of human development demographically, subjectively, and for identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is distinct demographically because there is a high level of demographic variability within this age group. Individuals around this age tend to be less stable than older adults in their residences, careers, and intimate relationships. Emerging adulthood is distinct subjectively because individuals in this stage identify with neither adolescence nor adulthood. Rather, this life phase seems to be characterized by an “in betweenness” both demographically, in terms of when they get married, move into their own place, or attending school; and developmentally, in that they are still exploring their identity. Lastly, emerging adulthood is distinct from later adulthood in opportunity for identity exploration. Given an often-lower level of social responsibility during this age range, emerging adulthood often is the period of life that offers an individual the most extensive opportunity to explore and potentially consolidate their values related to love, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 2000).

Given these distinctions between emerging adulthood and adolescence or later adulthood, and the history and frequency of use of social media among this age group, emerging adults offer a distinct and promising population for the further study of social media use and its influence on personal self-image.

#### **Self-Image**

Self-image is how an individual perceives themselves; it is part of their identity. If individuals have a clear positive self-image they will be more confident in their thoughts and

appearance and they will also feel closer to their ideal selves. However, if individuals have a negative self-image they will be less confident in their thoughts and appearance, they will also feel further away from their ideal selves (Ackerman, 2019). A positive self-image appears to be similar and dependent on how clear is one's self-concept and identity. A study investigating if self-concept clarity is a relatively stable individual difference or trait and, more specifically, if it is one that can be reliably captured in self-reports, defined self-concept as the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable (Campbell, Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavalley, Lehman, Darrin R. 1996). The clearer and more stable an individual's self-beliefs are, the more positive their self-image will be.

Identity also interconnects with self-image, more specifically multidimensional ethnic identity. Multidimensional identity theory recognizes that individuals have multiple identities. For example, an individual could identify both as a member of an ethnic group and a gender and a sexual identity, and so on (Wilson & Leaper, 2016). Depending on how positive one's self-image is or how clear one's self-concept is can determine how that individual will present themselves. A recent study on multidimensional identity articulated ways that group identities can affect people's self-concepts as well as their attitudes and behaviors toward in-group and out-group members (Wilson, 2016). Depending on an individual's self-image, how clear one's self-concept is, and how stable and clear their identity is will determine how individuals will act and present themselves around both in-group and out-group members.

### **Media and Self-Image**

Media has long been known to have an influence on developing individual's self-image. Research on television, movies, and news media have reported influences on adolescent behavior (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger, & Wright, 2001), young girls' body images

(Asawarachan, 2014), and the negative self-image and socialization of African-American males (Thomas, 2016). Moreover, social media appears to have an increased effect compared to general media; perhaps due to its inherently social nature. Research on social media has reported influences on shaping and reshaping identities (Rosdahl, 2018), self-objectifying for positive feedback (Bell, Cassarly, & Dunbar, 2018), and negative self-image and depressive tendencies among adolescent Facebook users (Dumitrache, Mitrofan, & Petrov, 2012).

For the past several years it has been clear that social media use has been extremely popular, especially for emerging adults. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, etc. have become a staple to the average young adult's everyday life. It is estimated that 90% of emerging adults use social media, while a majority of those users access multiple platforms and uses each of those platforms daily (Vannuccia, Flannerya, & McCauley Ohannessian, (2017).

A recent study on the increase of social media use discovered that not only are emerging adults using social media more often, they also discovered that emerging adults access multiple social media sites frequently. The study indicates that social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube dominate as notable front runners for the majority of U.S. adults use. However, emerging adults stand out due to the variety of platforms they frequently use. Roughly 78% of emerging adults use Snapchat, and a large majority of these users (71%) visit the platform multiple times per day. Similarly, 71% of Americans in this age group now use Instagram and close to half (45%) are Twitter users. (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

This increase of social media through emerging adults makes it essential to get a better understanding of effects social media may have on young adults. Young adults are still trying to

explore and find their identity which may result in them being more susceptible to potentially negative effects that social media may cause.

### **Social Media and Self-Image**

This increase in social media raises a question of how individual self-present and self-compare on social media and how these two processes might be related. It is known that development of self is a major task for emerging adults (Arnett, 2015). Research has shown that there is a relationship between self-concept clarity and self-presentation on social media (Fullwood, 2016). This study found that adolescents with a less stable sense of self were more likely to present an idealized version of themselves, while those with a more stable sense of self were more likely to present an online self which was consistent with their offline selves. This is essential when it comes to understanding the possible ways that social media effects how emerging adults view and present themselves online. This study suggests that establishing and solidifying one's identity prior to social media use can be beneficial in terms of presenting an online self that is consistent with one's offline self.

Another study on self-presentation also claims that self-presentation is a critical aspect of self-development. Social media often becomes a main source for exploring one's identity for emerging adults. The pictures and information individuals share on social media, allows for feedback from a large audience. This feedback and opportunity for social comparison may provide a significant resource in emerging adults' identity work (Yang-Brown, 2018).

Leon Festinger proposed a theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954). His theory states that humans have an inherent drive to accurately evaluate their opinions and abilities. When objective evaluations are not available, people compare themselves to their peers (Uhlir, 2015). A recent study on social comparison and self-presentation on social media discovered,

that after receiving public negative feedback people are more likely to make upward social comparisons due to self-presentational concerns, such as the thought that they are not good enough or equal to their peers. Upward social comparison means that we compare ourselves with those who we believe are better than us. These upward comparisons often focus on the desire to improve our current level of ability (Cherry, 2019). Ultimately this relation between social presentation and social comparison can become a vicious cycle of emerging adults comparing themselves to other individual's idealized self, then portraying an idealized version of themselves, only to make the next self-comparison to this idealized version that they see on social media.

A study on self-reflection and interpersonal connection shows that while focusing on one's own positive presented self-image leads to beneficial outcomes, it also shows that focusing on others' idealized images leads to harmful outcomes (Vogel, 2016). This is an essential point to note, because it can become difficult to differentiate idealized images and misleading posts that may suggest an individual living a life that does not resemble their actual everyday life. A recent study showed that "comparing oneself against others on social media as a means to assess who was doing better was related to avoiding or delaying processing identity-related information, which contributed to lower identity clarity." (Yang, 2017).

Ultimately technology and social media platforms have changed our way of living including the ways in which we communicate and interact with each other. Thus, this study is important to get a better understanding of how social media effects emerging adults' self-image and identity (Dumitrache, 2012).

### **Current Study**



The current research question focuses on social media use (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat) and how using them to present oneself on line may be related to having a clear concept of one's self and identity. Depending on how individuals view themselves may have an impact how they present themselves on line and how they present themselves on line may have an impact on how they view themselves. The clearer one's self-concept, the more likely it is that they will present themselves accurately on social media platforms. However, if an individual has a less clear concept of one's self, they may tend to present an idealized version of themselves that may arise from comparison with the on-line presentations of others.

The primary hypothesis is that self-presentation and social comparison on social media will be related to emerging adults' self-concept and ethnic identity. More specifically, a less clear self-concept will be related to lower levels of meaningful and accurate communication of personal information and greater levels of comparison of self to others on social media.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were recruited from an undergraduate, traditional-age, residential college and from a pool of recent graduates a local, public high school. There were a total of 75 respondents. Of these, 12 were excluded because they did not complete the survey and/or fell outside of the age range for this study. The 63 participants were within the age group of emerging adulthood ( $R = 18-23$ ,  $M = 22.84$ ,  $sd = 2.18$ ) Reported gender was 36 female (57.1%), 25 male (39.7%), and 2 genderqueer/nonbinary (3.2%). Reported ethnicity was 58 (92.1%) not Hispanic/Latino/Spanish and 5 (7.9%) Hispanic/Latino/Spanish. Reported ethnic identity was 3 (4.8%) Asian, 11 (17.5% Black), 43 (68.3%) White, 3 (4.8%) multi-racial, and 3 (4.8%) other. Participants were not compensated for their participation in this study.

## **Materials**

Several measures were administered to participants. Each is described below in order of presentation to respondents.

**Inventory of the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA-R).** The IDEA-R Scale, consists of 31 questions on a four-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. It assesses how each participant this time of their life during the developmental period of emerging adulthood. Sample questions include, “Is this period of your life a time of many possibilities?” and “Is this period of your life a time of finding out who you are?” Responses range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There are six subscales including identity exploration, experimentation, instability, other-focused, self-focused, and feeling “in-between”. Presentation of items was in a set order. Items are meaned and higher scores indicate that participants more agree that this scale construct describes this time of their (Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2007).

**Self-Concept Clarity (SCC).** The Self-Concept Clarity Scale, is a Likert scale consisting of 12 statements with responses on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Campbell et. al., 1996). Ten of the statements are reverse coded. This scale assessed the participants’ self-concept clarity by summing responses to all statements; the higher the score, the clearer the self-concept. Some of the statements on scale were, “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another” and “On one day I might have one opinion of myself and on another day I might have a different opinion”. Presentation of items was in randomized order.

**Multidimensional Identity (MDI).** The Multidimensional Identity Scale, is a Likert scale consisting of 26 statements. Responses are on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Wilson, 2016). This scale assessed the participants’ multidimensional identity; the higher the score, the clearer their identity. Some of the statements the scale

consisted of were, “I often think about the fact that I am a member of my ethnic group.” and “In general, I’m glad to be a member of my ethnic group.”. Presentation of items was in randomized order. Ten of the statements are reverse coded. There are five subscales including Centrality, In-Group Affect, In-Group Ties, Felt Typicality, and Felt Conformity.

**Social Media Self-Presentation (SMSP).** The Social Media Self-Presentation Scale, is a Likert scale consisting of 17 statements. Responses are on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Yang & Brown, 2017). This scale assessed the participants’ self-presentation on social media; the higher the score, the more likely that individual will accurately present their selves on social media. Some of the statements the scale consisted of were, “I openly share my emotions on social media” and “I usually disclose negative things about myself on social media”. Presentation of items was in a set order. Four of the statements are reverse coded. There are four subscales: Breadth, Depth, Positivity, and Authenticity.

**Social Media Social Comparison (SMSP).** The Social Media Self-Presentation Scale, is a Likert scale consisting of nine statements. Responses are on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This scale assessed the participants’ Social Comparison on Social Media; the higher the score, the more that individual will compare themselves to their peers. Some of the statements the scale consisted of were, “When using social media, I compare how I do things with how others do things.” and “On social media, I try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face”. Presentation of items was in a set order. There are two subscales including Ability and Opinion (Yang, Holden, & Carter, 2018).

## **Procedure**

The online administration began with an informed consent form. Participants needed to read and electronically sign this form in order to proceed with the study. Then, demographic

information was collected followed by information about most frequented social media platform, hours per day on that platform, other frequented platforms, and total hours per day on all platforms. Then measures of emerging adulthood, self-concept, ethnic identity, social media self-presentation, and social media comparison were presented in the order described above.

## **Results**

### **Social Media Use and Measurement Scales**

Type of social media use by time of total use is shown in Figure 1. This figure shows the total time participants spent on each type of social media platform. Facebook was reported as the most used platform and Twitter was the least used. Half of all respondents reported spending less than two hours a day on all social media platforms. The remaining half spent more than two hours a day (n=31).

Descriptive statistics for all 18 calculated scales and subscales are shown in Table 1. Self-Concept Clarity is calculated as the sum of responses to all questions on that scale after appropriate reverse coding of scale items. The remaining subscales are calculated as the mean of all subscale responses after appropriate reverse coding of subscale items. Reliabilities for almost all scales and subscales were satisfactory to good. The five subscales with alpha's below .70 were excluded from further analysis.

### **Relationships between Emerging Adulthood, Self-Image, and Social Media Use**

**Relationships between Emerging Adulthood and Self-Image.** Simultaneous multiple regression analysis assessed the predictive value of subscales of the Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood – Revised (IDEA-R) on Self-Concept Clarity and each subscale of Multidimensional Identity (MDI). Subscales of IDEA-R were not predictive of any subscales of MDI. However, some subscales of IDEA-R were predictive of SCC. The overall regression

model was statistically significant,  $R = .47$ ,  $F(5,57) = 3.23$ ,  $p = .012$  and explained 22.1% of the variance in Self-Concept Clarity. Subscale of time of experimentation accounted for some unique variability in grip strength ( $\beta = .32$ ) with higher time of experimentation associated with higher levels of self-concept clarity. Time of feeling in between accounted additional unique variability in strength ( $\beta = -.32$ ), with higher levels of feeling in between associated with lower levels of self-concept clarity. No other subscales of the IDEA-R accounted for significant unique variability in self-concept clarity in the multiple regression model. These and other results are summarized in Table 2.

**Relationships between Emerging Adulthood and Social Media Use.** A 4 (type of social media) x2 (total time on social media per day) factorial ANOVA was conducted on all subscales of the IDEA-R. This analysis indicated that there was a significant main effect of type of preferred social media platform on reports feeling like this is a time of experimentation,  $F(3,54) = 4.76$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$ . Post hoc analysis indicated those preferring Facebook ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $sd = .58$ ) reported lower feelings of time of experimentation that did those preferring Instagram ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $sd = .46$ , Tukey HSD  $p < .05$ ). There were no other significant differences between the groups. There also was a significant main effect of time of total daily social media use on feeling like this is a time of experimentation,  $F(1,54) = 4.06$ ,  $p = .049$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ , with those reporting less than two hours of daily use ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $sd = .58$ ) reporting lower levels of feeling like this was a time of experimentation than did those reporting more than two hours of daily use ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $sd = .56$ ). The interaction of type and time of social media use was not significant. These results are shown in Figure 2.

Further, analysis indicated that there also was a significant main effect of time of total daily social media use on feeling like this was a time of instability,  $F(1,54) = 5.22$ ,  $p = .026$ ,  $\eta^2 =$

.09, with those reporting less than two hours of daily use ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $sd = .56$ ) reporting lower levels of feeling like this was a time of instability than did those reporting more than two hours of daily use ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $sd = .61$ ). Main effect of type of social media use and interaction of type and time were not significant. These results are shown in Figure 3.

Simultaneous multiple regression analysis assessed the predictive value of subscales of the Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood – Revised (IDEA-R) on Social Media Use and each subscale of Multidimensional Identity (MDI). Subscales of IDEA-R were not predictive of any subscales of MDI. However, some subscales of IDEA-R were predictive of SMU. The overall regression model was statistically significant,  $R = .44$ ,  $F(5,57) = 3.16$ ,  $p = .030$  and explained 19.1% of the variance in Social Media Social Comparison. Subscale of time of experimentation accounted for some unique variability in grip strength ( $\beta = .33$ ) with higher time of experimentation associated with higher levels of social media social comparison of opinion. Time of feeling instability accounted additional unique variability in strength ( $\beta = .38$ ), with higher levels of feeling instability associated with lower levels of social media social comparison. No other subscales of the IDEA-R accounted for significant unique variability in social media social comparison in the multiple regression model. These and other results are summarized in Table 3.

**Relationships between Social Media Use and Self-Image.** Simultaneous multiple regression analysis assessed the predictive value of subscales of Social Media Social Comparison and Social Media Self-Presentation on and each subscale of Multidimensional Identity (MDI). Some subscales of Social Media Social Comparison and Social Media Self-Presentation were predictive of MDI. The overall regression model was statistically significant,  $R = .49$ ,  $F(4,58) = 4.5$ ,  $p = .003$  and explained 24.2% of the variance in Multidimensional Identity. Subscale of

Depth accounted for some unique variability in grip strength ( $\beta = .33$ ) with higher scores of Depth associated with higher levels of MDI Centrality. No other subscales of the Social Media Social Comparison and Social Media Self-Presentation accounted for significant unique variability in multidimensional identity in the multiple regression model. These and other results are summarized in Table 4.

### **Discussion**

General results of this study provide further support for relations between the time period of emerging adulthood and the development of self-image. Specifically, results indicate that those who were in strong agreement that this was a time of experimentation and that this was a time of feeling “in-between” had greater clarity about their self-concept. This suggests that while emerging adulthood a phase that developing individuals characterize as both as time of experimentation and as a time of feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, that they are able to incorporate that into a clear self-concept. Most interestingly, the more they agree that these characteristics describe this time in their life, the more clarity they have about their self-image. A greater clarity about self-concept may be a way of accepting and normalizing some of the transitional characteristics of emerging adulthood.

The results of this study support the hypotheses that some aspects of social media use are related to some aspects of ethnic identity during emerging adulthood. Specifically, a greater willingness to reveal emotions or weaknesses while using social media was related to a greater importance of ethnic identity. The results of this study also support the hypothesis that some parameters of social media use are related to some dimensions of emerging adulthood. Specifically, those reporting Facebook as their most frequented social media site rather than Instagram agreed more strongly that this time of their life was a time of experimentation and

possibilities. Similarly, the group spending more total daily time on social media also agreed more strongly about a time of experimentation. The group spending more daily time on social media also agreed more strongly that this time of their life was a time of instability and negativity.

This may be because when individuals feel that their ethnic identity is a central part of who they are then they might be more secure in their identity and therefore more willing to be vulnerable online. Those who report that they use Facebook more than they use Instagram agree more strongly about this being a time of experimentation, and this may be because the social mechanics of Facebook. Facebook allows individuals to not only post pictures similar to Instagram but they are also able to post status of how they feel and they think. This may result in individuals who use Facebook frequently feeling that Facebook allows more experimentation compared to Instagram. If an individual feel like this time of your life is one of instability, you might spend more time on social media trying to find a path to greater stability.

This study also found relationships between dimensions of emerging adulthood and social media use. Specifically, those who more strongly agreed that this was a time of experimentation and that this was a time of instability reported greater use of social media to compare their opinions with those of others. It may be that those who agree that this is a time of experimentation and instability feel a greater need to compare their opinions with those of others in order to develop their own stable and clear identity. In this way, social media may serve a similar developmental, social comparison function as has long been identified in other social interactions.

### **Limitations and Future Research**



Given the primary goal of this study, a limitation is that we were unable to investigate differences in social media use based on preferred social media platform and time spent using social media. In the future when trying to investigate relationships between social media use and self-image during emerging adulthood, researchers might focus more on how different social media platforms are used for self-presentation and comparison of abilities and opinions. This might be particularly important since social media platforms vary in their emphasis of visual images as well as in some platforms are primarily directed at people we know interpersonally while others are directed primarily at a broader, more anonymous audience.

This area of research is important for further understanding emerging adult's identity development and the current findings are promising in helping to clarify connections between social media use, ethnic identity, and self-concept clarity during the period of emerging adulthood.

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### Tables and Figures

Table 1.

#### Descriptive Statistics of Scales and Subscales

Scale/Subscale	M	SD	$\alpha$
IDEA-Identity Exploration	3.35	.54	.83
IDEA-Experimentation/Possibilities	3.27	.57	.79
IDEA-Negativity/Instability	2.95	.60	.81
IDEA-Other-Focus	2.75	.60	.34*
IDEA-Self-Focus	3.30	.50	.81
Self-Concept Clarity	34.97	8.88	.82
MDI-Centrality	2.74	1.09	.79
MDI-In-Group Affect	3.72	.96	.83
MDI-In-Group Ties	3.43	.90	.74
MDI-Felt Typicality	3.03	.59	.57*
MDI-Felt Conformity	2.41	.66	.54*
SMSP-Breadth	3.54	.89	.78
SMSP-Depth	2.21	.88	.76
SMSP-Positivity	4.50	.72	.72
SMSP-Authenticity	3.72	.73	.65*
SMSC-Ability	2.75	.67	.35*
SMSC-Opinion	3.02	1.16	.83

*Note:* \* indicates subscale not used in subsequent analyses

Table 2

## Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood with Self-Image

Variable	M	SD	<i>r</i> with Self- Concept Clarity	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	Sig.
Identity Exploration	3.35	.54	-.08	-.07	-.42	.676
Experimentation	3.27	.57	.17	.32	2.02	.048
Instability	2.95	.60	-.33**	-.18	-1.16	.250
Self-Focus	3.30	.50	.12	.10	.65	.516
Feeling In- Between	3.30	.68	-.28*	-.32	-2.11	.039

Note: \* indicates significant correlation at the  $p < .05$  level; \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 3

## Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood with Social Media Opinion Comparison

Variable	M	SD	<i>r</i> with Opinion	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	Sig.
Identity Exploration	3.35	.54	.13	-.20	-1.20	.234
Experimentation	3.27	.57	.26*	.32	2.06	.044
Instability	2.95	.60	.34**	.38	2.44	.018
Self-Focus	3.30	.50	.07	-.04	-.231	.819
Feeling In- Between	3.30	.68	.26*	.023	.167	.868

Note: \* indicates significant correlation at the  $p < .05$  level; \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 4

## Social Media Use with Centrality/Importance of Ethnic Identity

Variable	M	SD	<i>r</i> with Centrality of Ethnic Identity	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	Sig.
Breadth	3.34	.89	-.02	-.20	-1.62	.111
Depth	2.21	.88	.42**	.33	2.01	.049
Positivity	4.50	.72	.04	-.02	-.22	.826
Opinion	3.02	1.16	.40**	.23	1.56	.125

Note: \* indicates significant correlation at the  $p < .05$  level; \*\*  $p < .01$

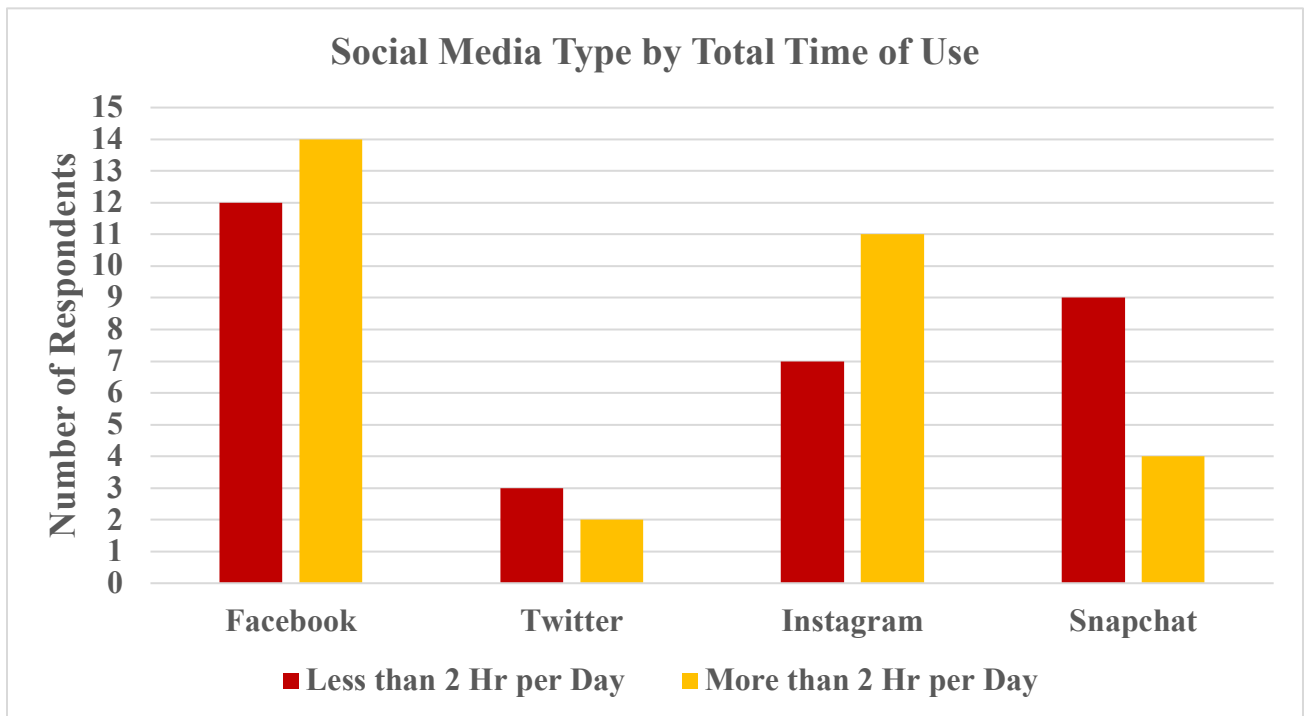


Figure 1.



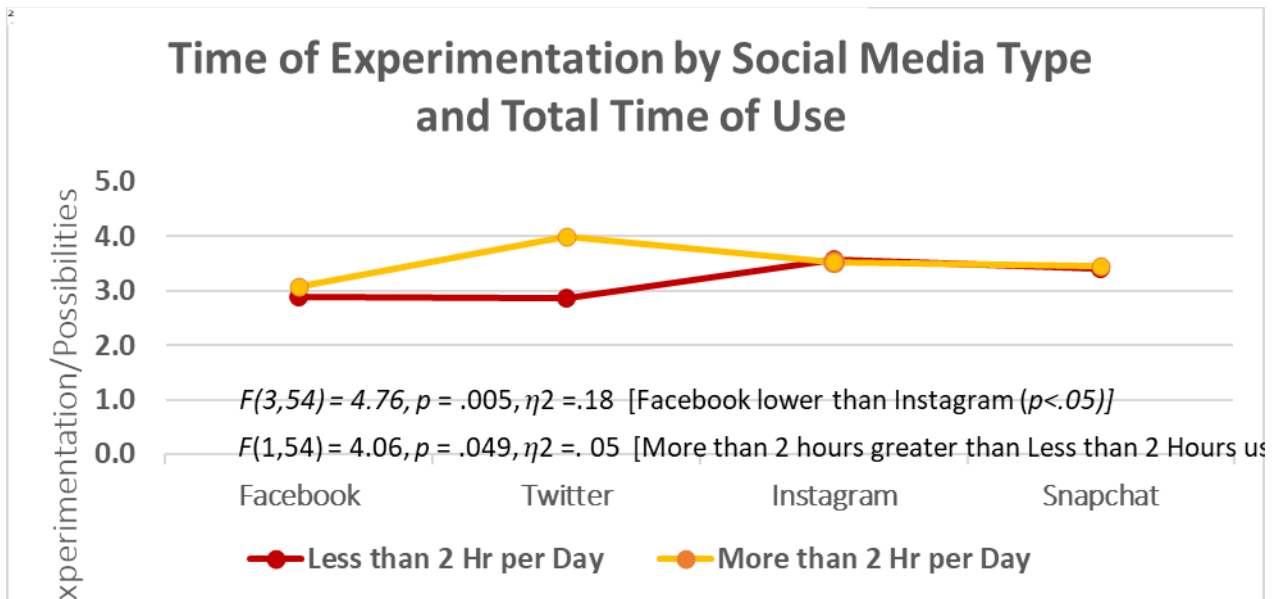


Figure 2.

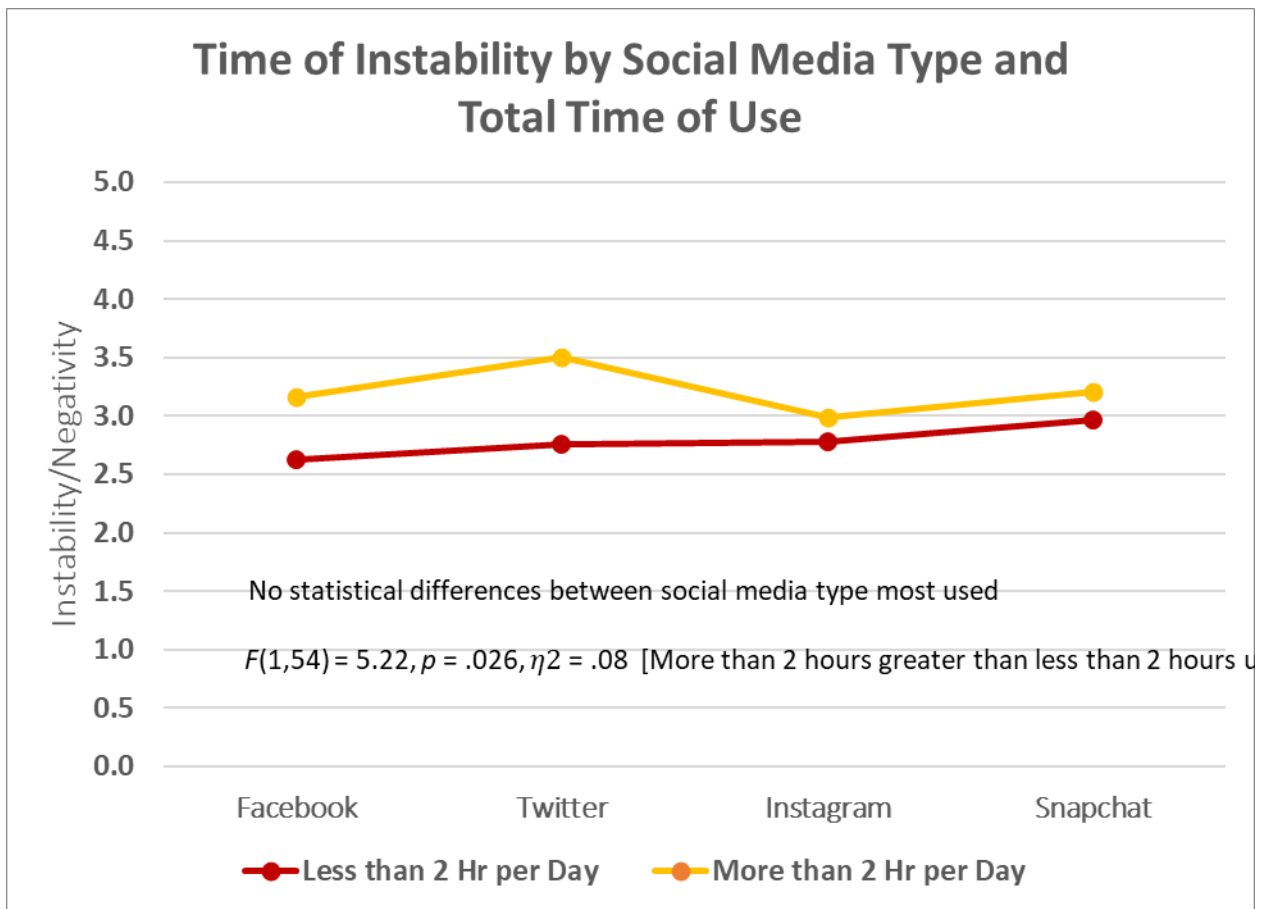


Figure 3.