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Social Media's Impact on One's Mental, Physical, and Emotional Well-being

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Social Media's Impact on One's Mental, Physical, and Emotional Well-being

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Waters College of Health Professions

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ABSTRACT

Social media is widely used in users' daily lives and is deeply embedded in the world of technology. Cellular devices and their applications have shown primarily negative effects on individuals' lives. Studies have shown a lower self-esteem in young adults addicted to their smartphone (Aznar-Díaz, et al., et al. 2020). Another study highlighted the reactions to creating one's own content versus the implications of consuming content. Individuals who created more than they consumed reported a higher level of self-esteem (Hygen, et al., 2021). While there were many studies regarding social media and wellness of young adults, there were gaps in research designed to find a way to make social media have the best impact on one's life as possible. The purpose of this study was to find commonalities among the positive and negative relationships of social media to improve user experience with such applications as it relates to their daily lives. Findings included several themes regarding the positive and negative uses of social media. Participants reported stronger relationships, increased sense of self, and better experiences in using social media when curating their feed and following pages that post meaningful content. On the other hand, participants also reported the downsides of social media, which include comparing themselves to others, hyper accessibility to toxic posts and news reports, and seeking external validation from others.

INDEX WORDS: Social Media, Wellness, Mental Health, Social Media Relationships, Routine

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

Social media is a relatively new medium of utilizing technology. It can be used for managing businesses, maintaining relationships, meeting new people, creating works of art, and more, and has taken the technological world by storm. With applications ranging from photo sharing, to creating videos, to writing text posts, there is something for everyone. This form of expression is highly used by college aged students (Aznar-Díaz, et al., et al. 2020). These young adults are able to produce their own content and join supportive communities to help facilitate their own personal growth.

Users who integrate social media use in their own routine of social activity have had positive outcomes from doing so (Bekalu, et al., 2019). This medium for connection and keeping in touch with loved ones allows for stronger relationships regardless of the living distance between people (Beyens, et al., 2021). People can use social media with intention, which includes actions such as sharing links, posting status updates, sending reactions, direct messaging, or commenting on others' posts (David, et al., 2022). There is a positive effect on their lives due to their active presence and increased involvement in their social community when users utilize the apps in this manner.

Furthermore, social media users can improve their mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing while being active users of the medium. Individuals who take an active role in their social media usage by sharing photos of themselves are more likely to receive positive feedback from friends and followers, thus strengthening their self-perception (Hygen, et al., 2021). This begs the question as to what other areas of health and wellness could users reap the benefits from as a result of their positive usage of the

applications. Additionally, people who have positive experiences in their social media life have a better quality of sleep as compared to those who report negative uses of the applications (Levenson, et al., 2020).

That being said, social media has a negative side too. Studies have shown that smartphone addictions in young adults coincide with lowered self-esteem (Aznar-Díaz, et. al, 2020). Furthermore, social media usage heightens the potential for comparing oneself to others, also lowering self-esteem (Kovacheff, et al., 2020). With research comparing consuming media to producing media, it is evident that constantly paying attention to other people's content reduces users' self-esteem, while creating their own content (and being passionate about it) increases their sense of self (Hygen, et al., 2021). When people create their own content, it places the focus on their own talents, leads them to organize their time based on their own preferences, and reduces the time spent comparing their lives to other users'. Rather than mindlessly scrolling through social media feeds, these users spend their time making something of their own, while using their individual voice.

While there are many studies about social media, overall health of young adults, and the two combined, there are gaps regarding finding a method to make social media have the best impact on one's life as possible. The purpose of this study is to find patterns in young adults' usage of social media to use their behaviors and routines to help find a general method that will be beneficial to young adults in their use of social media. The overall goal of this work is to gather information to create a guide for social media users (majority young adults) to use to implement a healthy relationship with their apps to benefit every facet of their health and life.

CHAPTER 2:

METHODS:

Participants & Procedures:

Fifty-three college-aged adults, with a mean age of 20.68 years, ranging from ages 18-26, who use social media participated in this qualitative research. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, the researcher created a Qualtrics Survey with a range of open-ended questions to learn about participants' experiences with using social media. Participants were asked to complete this survey via two methods: social media posts on the researcher's account and requesting professors to share the survey with their classes. Posts were created to share on the researcher's personal Instagram story to gather participants who met the requirements to participate. The message stated "Calling all social media users! What has your experience with social media been like? Please take 15 minutes of your day to let me know with this survey via this link:

https://georgiasouthern.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eewZ2tdeS2GYVds

Thank you! Alexandria Shearer Study Title: Social Media's Impact on One's Mental, Physical, and Emotional Well-being (Honors College, Waters College of Health Professions)" The demographic areas asked were age, race/ethnicity, and gender.

In addition, the researcher contacted two professors in the Waters College of Health and Professions and requested that they share the link with their classes, as well. The script was as follows: "Dear (Professor Name), This semester I am conducting research for my thesis titled Social Media's Impact on One's Mental, Physical, and Emotional Well-being. In order to understand social media users' experiences, I have created a Qualtrics survey for participants of my study to share their reflections. This

research is a part of the Honors College in relationship with the Waters College of Health Professions. Students are asked to participate in a Qualtrics survey regarding their personal experience with social media. The estimated time they would take to complete the questionnaire is 15 minutes. Could you please share this link to the survey with your classes on Folio? https://georgiasouthern.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eew Z2tdeS2GYVds Thank you for your help and time, Alexandria Shearer."

A pilot study of this Google Form was conducted during Spring of 2021 with six participants submitting their responses in regard to their relationship with social media. Updates were made to the questions of the Google Form to include more information regarding demographics. Sections for age, race, and gender were added to the form with a free response box.

Measures:

A survey was created to collect data. Subjective answers from participants via Qualtrics asked how they utilized social media and in what capacity of health they deemed themselves to be. The first statement asked participants to describe their relationship with social media. The second question asked, "do you have a positive relationship with social media?" with follow up prompts "if no, describe what made your relationship with social media negative/unhealthy" and "if yes, describe what changes/tips you have to create a healthy relationship with social media". The third question asked "How do you use social media to benefit your overall mental, physical, emotional wellbeing? The fourth part was a segment with a checklist of social media apps, asking "which social media apps are you most active on?". This list was composed

of options to select FaceBook, Instagram, Linked In, Pinterest, Reddit, SnapChat, YouTube, TikTok, Tumblr, and Twitter. The fifth question was "what do you think of unfollowing others?". The sixth, seventh, and eighth questions focused on personal content asking, "what do you post about?," "what is your goal when posting?", and "what is your motivation in creating your posts?" The last two questions asked, "how is social media meaningful to you?" and "what does it mean for you for something to be meaningful?".

An excel sheet of the responses were generated to review all the answers on the same page. This allowed for finding helpful similarities and patterns regarding the participants' relationship with social media. Participants' responses were used to identify common themes and support topics throughout this thesis. Each theme found in the data was given its own section with more elaboration and support from participant's quotes.

Data Analysis

Responses from the Qualtrics were reviewed and the researcher collected information for the study. The researcher also noted which areas of social media use were positive for the participants, as well as where the negative effects occurred. By enlisting the help of a critical friend, the researcher compared their organization of the material with that of the critical friend's to avoid bias (Carlse, 2019). The researcher and critical friend reviewed participants' responses independently and categorized their reflections as positive or negative. Positive was defined as the specific use of social media enhances one's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Negative was defined as specific use of social media diminishes one's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The main goal

of the data analysis was to determine the positive and negative interactions with social media from the participants. In addition, this information was examined to find commonalities as well as unique responses. Since everyone's relationship with social media is different, the responses were applied to the study as suggestions rather than definitive solutions for improving one's wellness in using social media.

CHAPTER 3:

RESULTS:

Results of this study included a deeper understanding of when social media can turn from beneficial to toxic. Participants in the study included social media users aged 18-26 of any ethnicity, or gender. Out of the 55 participants, Two responses were omitted because participants were outside of the specified age range, leaving a total of 53 responses. The age breakdown is as followed, was 18-years-old, six were 19-years-old, 20 were 20-years-old, 14 were 21-years-old, seven were 22-years-old, four were 23-years-old, and one was 24-years-old, with the mean age being 20.68 years. One participant did not report their age. In regard to race and ethnicity, 33 were Caucasian, 14 were African-American, three were Asian, and two were Hispanic. Gender-wise, 26 participants identified as female and 17 identified as male.

Of the total number of responses, 35 included answers that were labeled as negative, and 48 included responses that were labeled as positive. Major themes in the negative realm included comparison, external validation, and the dampened moods due to the accessibility of toxic content or attitudes on their feeds. When asked what their views of social media were, and how they reflected on and perceived their own usage of the medium, nine themes emerged. Six major themes in the positive use of social media involved curating their feeds for inspiration, strengthening meaningful relationships, creating content to uplift others and themselves, sharing more about their identity and utilizing their accounts to hold themselves accountable. Three major themes in the negative use of social media included comparison, seeking external validation, and hyper accessibility of toxic news or attitudes on the feeds.

Positive Uses of Social Media

Curating feeds for inspiration and education

Participants described following pages that motivated them with quotes or devotionals, inspired them via their hobbies. Some individuals explained how they agreed with unfollowing others who were not inspiring them or adding anything of substance to their lives. One respondent stated, "I unfollowed the accounts that I believe did not help me, and I follow accounts that will help me." Another explained that one of the "tips that [they] have to create a healthy relationship with social media is to unfollow unhealthy accounts." In addition, users reflected on the beneficial impacts of following pages that posted daily devotionals, quotes, or of individuals who motivate their followers to grow, too. A reflection from one of the participants is "I mainly use it to keep in contact with my friends and to read daily scriptures and posts that I follow on my Instagram. These little reminders help me have good days and remind me that I am enough." Participants also discussed gathering inspiration for their hobbies on social media accounts by following similar pages or tags focused on similar interests. One user uses social media "to look up recipes to try and find good at home workouts," while another finds "ideas, or hacks, or projects that [were] originally inspired from something else [they] saw on social media." There is an abundance of creative ideas in a number of interests that people have used as inspiration in their own creative pursuits and favorite pastimes. The medium serves as a means to educate individuals, as well. A participant explained how they "use it to help my knowledge in health, beauty such as skin care, and to learn about stocks, bitcoin, etc." and curated their feed because social media is "what you put into it,"

motivating them to change their following based on their intentions. Positive impacts of social media additionally include in the educational realm. Whether it is learning a topic from someone who explains it in a way that resonates with you, or learning about new ideas for hobbies and finding new passions, social media can assist in the discovery/pursuit of knowledge.

Strengthening meaningful relationships

People utilize social media to maintain a connection with their loved ones from around the world. Social media serves as a way to keep the ones they care about and let into their lives informed about the achievements, updates, and interests in their own lives. One user explained their intention in using social media: "My motivation is being able to show myself to my friends and family that like to know what I've been up to. A lot of my friends and family don't go to my school or live in Georgia so it's nice that they feel like they aren't missing out!" In addition, participants noted that feelings of connection serve as a primary influence in having an account and keeping up to date with relatives and friends. This form of connection is reciprocated as well in that users are able to feel like they are still a part of the lives of others who may not live nearby. One participant described their use of social media as a means "to keep up with [their] friends and people at Georgia Southern…[which] makes [them] happy so this is positive for [their] overall wellbeing." Although many users do not see each other in person on a daily basis, they are still able to feel this sense of community via social media. One respondent stated that "social media is used as a platform to be able to connect with others and share interests and that is what I love most about the media. It's meaningful [to be] able to see my old friends or see the hobbies of others." This medium has served as an accessible way to

connect with loved ones around the globe. Responders described that sharing photos helps keep family and friends updated. While social media has options for direct messaging, the ability to share photos likely stimulates a greater sense of community just by seeing each other's faces, accomplishments, and goings-on in life.

Creating content to uplift others

Participants who create content shared their motivations behind producing social media posts. One of the major sub-themes within creating content included doing so with the purpose of inspiring their followers. "I use it as a way to encourage and be a light to others so that I can feel better when others feel better," one participant shared." Lifting others up and being a light…can impact someone and leave them feeling encouraged or motivated." Sharing positivity through social media can spread quickly and remotely due to the medium's high accessibility. Others create content with the goal of helping them in their lives with experiences they have gone through, too. "My goal of posting is to reach as many people as possible on my followers list to help them with their lives by telling what I have experienced and went through myself," one respondent shared.

Creating content to hold themselves accountable

Self-motivation is another factor serving as a reason for users creating content. One participant reflected on their use of social media for keeping data on their growth and development in CrossFit. Social media "helps with accountability and progress" and they "use it for programming workouts." Users can utilize social media as a form of reflecting on their progress and goals. Furthermore, social media provides a public space that can be used to share achievements and hold oneself accountable to continuing in the process of accomplishing their intentions/objectives.

Creating content as a form of self-expression

Platforms of social media also serve as a method of self-expression. Social media can facilitate the journey to discovering one's identity and expressing their interests, talents, and reflections. Users share their hobbies and likes using their accounts as a means to spread their joy to others or find new friends with similar interests. One respondent shared that social media "is a way to show personality." "This personal level can provide an intimate understanding of oneself, further instilling self-worth and confidence by sharing on a public format. Another participant stated: "I just post the things I love to do and enjoy on my social media so it made it a very positive environment for me." In addition, users share their spirituality and beliefs on these platforms, which could be considered both a means of connection and self-expression due to a shared belief. "My goal is to share how the Lord has blessed me and to be encouraging to others," one user shared.

Reflections & self-control

Users described their solutions to negative habits in their use of social media. Having the awareness and putting forth the effort to combat the toxic side of social media is a positive effect of utilizing the applications. Additionally, participants reported adapting to combat the negative effects of social media on their mentals. One user explained that they "have learned to use unfollowing as a tool. If a post comes up that makes [them] uncomfortable, or if [they] notice [they] see a post and compare [themself] to the person that posted it, [they] try to unfollow to not keep the cycle going." This awareness and reflection of how social media can decrease their mental health seems to be essential in helping them develop the tools to utilize the medium in a meaningful way.

One participant noted that they've "learned how to not compare [themself] to other people [they] see online." Responders described the solutions they included in their daily lives to combat their own negative tendencies when using social media to create a more positive experience. One user's solution included: "I began to limit the time I spent on my phone in general and more specifically my social media. I made it a setting on my phone where I could only access these apps at specific times." This self-awareness and implementation of boundaries serves as evidence for self-control and maturity. "I spend time away from social media to live in the moment," a participant shared. "When seeing other posts, look for inspiration, do not try to compare yourself to them. Before posting, think about what you are letting the whole world see. Most importantly put social media away and put your mental health first." This serves as a good practice for users to develop their reflective capabilities. Users reflected on the benefits of being mindful about the content being consumed and the boundaries in place in regard to following people. Another participant described their solutions upon reflection: "To create a healthy relationship with social media I have set a daily time limit for all social media apps on my phone. Once my allowed time is up for the day, the apps become "locked". I have also turned off push notifications and the notifications badge so that I am not getting notified and distracted all day. I have also been cautious about what personal information I provide on my account, and who can see that information."

Negative Uses of Social Media

Comparison

Users explained how they found themselves comparing who they were and what they had with other individuals on social media. Participants described social media as a

highlight reel, only showcasing the achievements and top tier events of life. Furthermore, these photos are taken to share the best looking version of themselves, with angles and filters providing an illusion to real life. One user's reflection described their past experiences comparing themselves: "I used to compare myself to people on social media and would be disappointed in myself when I didn't look a specific way or looked at what our society deems "perfect" or I would obsess over how many likes I received on a post. This caused me to have a very unhealthy relationship with social media but I realized that those people we "idolize" are not perfect and they struggle with the same things I do and maybe even more because they have this social standard they are forced to uphold." Others explain the pressures affiliated with social media and upholding a certain image. One user explained "I find social media fun at times, and other times it is very toxic. I feel pushed to live a "picture perfect" life because of social media, when this is actually impossible. Nobody's life is perfect." While another stated: "Social media is honestly a hit or miss with me. I have good days on it and then there are the bad days where I am just beating myself up because I am not as "successful" or as "pretty".

Seeking external validation

Some participants reflected on how much attention and importance they gave to the likes and comments of others on their posts. A participant explained: "my goal for posting is mainly just for myself but I am not going to lie, I do think about the amount of likes and comments and try to get more than I got on my last post which is not very healthy." This search for external validation can leave users feeling decreased self-worth with the absence of validation through a certain quantity of likes or comments. The desire for reaction, attention, and interaction on posts can quickly turn into a toxic relationship

with social media. One user explained their "only motivation in creating [their] post is making [their] life look more fun than it actually is."

Hyper accessibility of toxic news or attitudes on the feeds

Participants shared experiences regarding the consumption of news and toxic content on social media. With an abundance of information at the click of a button, users are susceptible to viewing a wide array of subjects, including topics that induce stress. Although the users are not directly experiencing certain events around the world, they may have more access to it through social media. One participant stated: "I wouldn't say it's super negative but I have found that I often feel worse after using social media rather than feeling better. I often find myself comparing myself to others and it usually puts a damper on my mood, especially when I see posts about current social issues." The randomized accessibility leads to users not intentionally going in search of this information, but still being presented it anyway. This unexpected consumption of sad information can lead to unwanted feelings of worry simply by opening the application. "I get on there to find something to brighten up my day and instead I end up finding something that makes me sad again," one user remarked. In addition, some users create content that can be detrimental to one's health, especially if done in a manner of poor attitude. Arguments in the comments and words of hate are also frequently accessible on these platforms, adding another layer of negative feelings to users who consume this, especially on a daily basis. A respondent warned "do not fall into the trap of commenting mean, negative things, when you see a post or comment you do not agree with.

CHAPTER 4:

DISCUSSION:

Increasing the knowledge of utilizing social media to benefit one's well-being is essential due to the widespread use of social media in the lives of the global population. This study evaluated the qualitative feedback of social media users aged 18-26 who utilize a variety of apps in their everyday lives. Their reflections of how social media impacted their lives, what they have learned in utilizing the medium, and how they use the applications personally provided more information regarding the intentional use of social media in a positive manner.

Results from this study showed that social media users have positive aspects from their interactions on the applications. To utilize social media in a positive way, individuals can improve their wellness by curating their feeds so the content they do consume adds educational, inspirational, and/or relational value to their lives. Additionally, according to the participants' reflections, people who aim to be active in both their connection with others and in creating their own content utilizing their social media accounts tend to have a healthier relationship with the medium.

Users can choose to follow pages that post about their hobbies, inspire them through quotes, or those of people that they know. In the same respect, people can unfollow pages that cause them anxiety or that instill negative feelings in them. The accessibility users have to helpful, motivating, and positive content can provide beneficial effects in other areas of their lives, such as self-esteem. Although participants noted the toxic nature of comparison, they also explained the positive impacts of following people who inspire them to grow and improve themselves. This shows that

with intentionality, the comparative nature of social media can be used in a beneficial way. The results of this present study could be used to further learn about this comparison phenomenon and have users with low self-esteem choose people to follow that will help motivate them and increase their self-love. By taking a mindful approach in who they follow, users can improve many aspects of life, one including self-esteem for their mental health. This finding contrasts with previous research that found decreased confidence in users and negative self-evaluations in people who already had a low reported self-esteem (Kovacheff, et al., 2020). The previous research does not attribute the content these participants chose to follow.

Connecting with others is a positive attribute of using social media, with participants reporting one of their main purposes of utilizing these apps as keeping in touch with relatives and friends who live far away. In addition, this present study found that participants enjoyed using social media to update the people in their life, and in turn see what they are up to. When users interact with their loved ones' posts, and vice versa, there is a stronger sense of community and a positive feeling when utilizing the medium. These findings support the results found in previous studies that highlighted the negative effects of simply viewing and not interacting, otherwise known as passively using social media (David, et al., 2022). However, the results found in this research contrasted the ideas found in previous studies that related Instagram use with a lesser feeling of closeness among friends (Beyens, et al., 2021). When used in an intentional way to genuinely connect virtually, social media can be beneficial to one's overall wellbeing by providing an accessible means of support from relatives and friends.

In this research, participants reported having positive experiences creating posts that inspire them, help track their progress, and allow them to receive motivation or positive feedback from their virtual community. Participants noted that sharing their experiences allowed them to relate to their followers. By publishing their own content, users reported having a more purposeful and personal relationship with social media. Participants who create posts describe a positive relationship with social media when used as a means of motivating others, bringing joy to people's day, and sharing more about themselves. This finding supports a study that found social media posting anxiety occurs when users do not act as their authentic selves using the medium (Aruguete, et al., 2022). This is likely due to a sense of shame in expressing who they truly are, and possibly a fear of ridicule from others. However, when users share genuinely on the platform, they learn more about who they are, and thus show up as their authentic selves on these applications, and in the world outside of technology.

With the reflections of the participants, it is evident that there is a way to utilize social media to benefit the user's lives and overall wellness. Specifically, responses regarding intentionality of selecting the pages follow, the purpose of the content users create, and the ability to connect with loved ones added to the overall positivity regarding their social media experience. These findings, combined with previous research, help extend our understanding of social media's potential positive and negative effects on users' wellbeing. With this increased awareness, this knowledge can be utilized to help social media users navigate the platforms in a healthy way.

Limitations and Future Directions:

Limitations of this project include the subjectivity of participant's individual opinions and attempting to apply this for the use of a population. Utilizing social media is not one size fits all, but is up to each user to determine if their quality of life is being diminished or enhanced. Each person's mind also has individual interpretations and perceptions of their life and social media's effect on it. Perhaps in the future, there is a way to monitor users and see how they are affected by adopting certain habits in the use of social media that are positive or negative and analyzing how their health is affected. This could potentially be turned into a quantitative form of researching this topic by adding in variables of using social media for five hours a day for a month and comparing it to the same users another month of them using social media for one hour a day instead. Then, participants would be asked to indicate whether or not they performed given tasks related to wellbeing and their daily obligations to determine if the time spent on social media would impact their abilities to maintain self-care and accomplish their responsibilities. This type of study could find that the time using social media and being engaged on the app affects one's well-being when compared to the recordings of their habits associated with a healthy life. Ideally, the findings of this and similar research would be used to assist in educating social media users on the effects these apps have on their lives and what to be on the lookout for to avoid the negative effects and enhance the positive qualities.

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