

Title - Relationship Between Social Media Use and Social Anxiety Among Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Social media is a growing phenomenon and has rapidly become a fundamental channel of communication in the lives of emerging adults, who are its heaviest users. The psychological implications of social media are in the early stages of examination, and include possible correlations with anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. In addition, young adults, who were maturing at the dawn of social media, are experiencing a variety of problems related to the compulsive use of the Internet and social media. Social anxiety, which is a specific type of anxiety disorder prevalent among emerging adults, often presents itself in adolescence and frequently goes unrecognized and untreated. Young adults with social anxiety face significant challenges as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. Despite the prevalence of social media and social anxiety among emerging adults, the relationship between the two is not well understood. A research study is proposed that will determine whether a positive correlation exists between time spent on social media among emerging adults and social anxiety. Data will be collected from college students at a Northeast university using an anonymous online survey that will ascertain their average daily social media use, as well as their scores from a well-validated instrument that measures social anxiety. Correlational research will be performed to determine whether a positive correlation exists between social media use and social anxiety. The limitations of the research design will be discussed. Implications to the field of counseling will be presented, including clinical assessments that determine whether social media use contributes to symptoms of social anxiety and treatments that reduce maladaptive behavior associated with social media.

There are important implications for this research from a Christian worldview standpoint. Technology is changing at a pace that makes it difficult to stop and assess whether its application

is congruent with Christian values and principles. Social media is a tool for communication. The exchange of information on this medium can be used to exalt and glorify the Lord, or it can be used to dishonor him. Ephesians 4:49 says “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (English Standard Version). While many loving relationships have been bred through dating web sites and social media, the Internet has been used all too often as a medium for cyberbullying and inappropriate sexual interactions. The anonymity of social media can make it an attractive medium for behaviors in which some may not so readily partake in an offline world. The increasing amount of time individuals are spending online are cause for reflection and possible concern. Leviticus 26:1 says, “You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind” (New Living Translation). Some might liken social media to an idol, given the amount of time many young adults spend on it. The negative consequences associated with prolonged uses of social media need to be explored so that individuals can be well informed of their effects and be guided in the way of truth and knowledge. This research explores the relationship between social media use and social anxiety, and is intended to inform counseling practices in such a way that brings wisdom and healing to others, and ultimately glorifies the Lord. “And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord” (English Standard Version).

Relationship Between Social Media Use and Social Anxiety Among Emerging Adults

Social media has become an integral part of the lives of emerging adults and the increase in multi-platform usage provides many ways for individuals to communicate in an online world (The Nielsen Company, 2017). Given that social media use is a relatively recent phenomenon, research examining its effect on psychological health is in its infancy and not yet clear (Kittinger, Correia, & Irons, 2012; Lin et al., 2016). Social anxiety is a common mental health concern among emerging adults and can be particularly disadvantageous given the social interactions required for the transitional issues they will encounter (Parade, Leerkes, & Blankson, 2010). A research study is proposed that will determine whether a positive correlation exists between social media use among emerging adults and social anxiety. There are important clinical implications to the field of counseling with regards to assessment and treatment for individuals with social anxiety.

Literature Review

Operational Definitions

Social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Lin, et al., 2016, p. 324). The practice of using social media, referred to as social networking, is “the use of Internet-based social media programs to make connections with friends, family, classmates, customers, and clients” (Investopedia, n.d., “Social Networking”, para. 1). Social anxiety is “the fear of interaction with other people that brings on self-consciousness, feelings of being negatively judged and evaluated...and leads to avoidance” (Richards, 2017, “What is Social Anxiety”, para. 1). Emerging adults are young adults between the ages of 18-29 years old (Munsey, 2006).

Social Media

Prevalence among emerging adults. There has been a steady increase in the use of social media over the past 12 years and the heaviest users are young adults between the ages of 18-29 years old with a penetration rate of 90% (Moreno & Whitehill, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2015). Almost a quarter of their media consumption, which equates to over six hours per week, was spent on social networking sites in 2016, a 21% increase from 2015 (The Nielson Company, 2017). About 82% of young adults access these sites with their smartphones; the most popular platforms being Facebook (FB), Instagram, Twitter, & Pinterest, respectively (The Nielson Company, 2017). Given the pervasive use of social media, research regarding its impact on emerging adults has started to emerge.

Developmental implications. From a developmental perspective, social media can help foster a young person's identity and connection with peers (Michikyan & Suárez-Orozco, 2016). Twenge (2013) cautioned that while social media may facilitate more social connections, they are not necessarily intimate ones. The specific use of social media may be the mediating factor with regards to the type of connections young adults are making online. In a study among college students, Henry (2012) found that when social media was used for affirmative social purposes, such as making new friends, measures of psychosocial well-being were positive. Conversely, psychological stressors were more apparent when college students turned to social media to cope with personal problems, suggesting they lack the social skills to build healthy interpersonal relationships.

Emerging adults and problematic Internet use. Emerging adults, who grew up with the Internet and witnessed the advent of social media, are now experiencing a variety of negative effects from its use. Problematic internet use (PIU), which is defined as "uncontrolled use of the Internet that leads to significant psychosocial and functional impairments", has been associated

with overall use of the Internet and Facebook specifically (Liu, Desai, Krishnan-Sarin, Cavallo, & Potenza, 2011, p. 836). For example, one research study found that college students experienced problems such as compulsive use of the Internet, preoccupation, time management issues, and impairment related to various life activities (Kittinger, Correia, & Irons, 2012). In this same study, it was found that the use of Facebook promoted symptoms related to Internet addiction. It is estimated that PIU is present among 4% of high school students, and is strongly associated with substance abuse and aggressive behavior, as well as depression (Liu, et al., 2011; Lin, et al., 2016).

Social Anxiety

Prevalence among emerging adults. Social anxiety is prevalent among emerging adults (Brook & Willoughby, 2015). Symptoms commonly present themselves in adolescence and often go undiagnosed and untreated (Zakri, 2015). Compared to the general public, research has shown that college students present with consistently higher clinical rates of social anxiety (Parade, Leerkes, & Blankson, 2010).

Implications among emerging adults. Underlying symptoms of social anxiety are particularly detrimental to emerging adults, many of whom rely on social engagement with others for a successful transition into college and new vocations. Brook and Willoughby (2015), whose research was driven by theoretical perspectives of psychosocial development in the college years, found that socially anxious students have difficulty forming the social connections needed for academic success. They proposed the fear of interacting with others and being negatively evaluated may prevent socially anxious students from engaging successfully with the academic community. Another study among college students revealed social anxiety increased

the motivation to engage in hazardous drinking when doing so was perceived to increase their social assertiveness (Cludius, Stevens, Bantin, Gerlach, & Hermann, 2013).

Association with Internet use. The Internet provides a safe place where socially anxious individuals can avoid face-to-face interactions; however, it also contributes to problematic use and exacerbates the avoidance of off-line communications. Prizant-Passal, Shechner, and Aderka (2016), who conducted a quantitative meta-analysis, found a positive correlation between social anxiety and feeling comfortable online; hence, the anonymity of the Internet makes it an attractive venue. Weidman, et al. (2012) discovered that socially anxious individuals tend to self-disclose more in online than offline settings. This correlates with research showing individuals with higher social anxiety view online communication to be significantly less threatening than face-to-face interactions (Lee & Stapinski, 2012; Weidman, et al., 2012). Therefore, online communication may be a way of avoiding interactions that take place offline. Lee & Stapinski (2012) found that individuals with higher social anxiety communicated more with others online than offline, leading them to suggest the Internet encourages online friendships at the expense of face-to-face ones.

Social anxiety is also positively correlated with PIU (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, & Aderka, 2016; Lee & Stapinski, 2012). This implies that the use of the Internet leads to negative consequences for individuals with social anxiety. Social anxiety is associated with higher rates of depression and lower levels of self-esteem among individuals who use the Internet as a compensatory social medium (Weidman, et al., 2012).

Social Media Use and Social Anxiety

Research that has explored the association between the usage of social media and social anxiety is limited. In a study among adolescents aged 11 to 17, Woods and Scott (2016) found

that social media use was positively correlated with anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and poor sleep quality. Adolescents who have an emotional investment in social media were at an increased risk for anxiety and depression due to feeling isolated and distressed when they are not on social media.

Shaw, Timpano, Tran, and Joormann (2015) conducted a study that specifically looked at the association between patterns of Facebook usage and social anxiety among college students. Students with higher social anxiety symptoms used FB in a more passive nature (i.e. observing others' profiles without actually interacting with them). They postulated that passively using FB may increase social anxiety symptoms by leading individuals to brood about various interpersonal concerns, such as feeling excluded and making comparisons to others. They call for more research that further examines the impact of FB on social anxiety.

Research Question

The relationship between overall social media use and social anxiety among young adults is not well known. In researching specific Internet usage, such as social media, "information about social networks and social anxiety is surprisingly scarce" and more research is needed that will "focus on time spent on specific Internet uses, as these may be differentially related to social anxiety" (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, & Aderka, 2016, p. 228). Therefore, determining whether a relationship is present between the time spent on social media and social anxiety among emerging adults is relevant. The research question being proposed is whether increased time spent on social media is positively correlated with an increase in social anxiety.

Proposed Research Study

For the purpose of determining whether a positive correlation exists between social media use among emerging adults and social anxiety, the following research study is proposed. The

methods used to measure the variables are described. The limitations of the research design are also addressed.

Methods

Procedure. An online survey will be administered to college students. Participants will follow a link from their student web portal to an anonymous survey where they will answer questions pertaining to time spent on social media and complete a short form of the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (Mattick & Clarke, 1998). An online survey will be employed due to its high response rate when used for studies among samples of young adults who are Internet savvy (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006).

Sampling. The sample will be obtained using convenience sampling. This sampling method will allow researchers to quickly and economically recruit participants through an easily accessible means (Zigmund & Babin, 2007). Convenience samples of college students are common in studies assessing behavior, yet caution must be used when projecting findings to the population (Peterson & Merunka, 2014).

Participants. Both undergraduate and graduate students will be invited to participate. Data pertaining to age, ethnicity, and academic year will be obtained. No identifying information will be collected, thus maintaining confidentiality.

Setting. The research will take place at a four-year public university in the Northeast. Recruitment will be through an advertisement on the university student web portal. Students will be qualified prior to taking the survey by indicating they have at least one social media account.

Instrumentation - Social Media Use Questionnaire. A questionnaire will be developed to measure the average number of hours participants spend using social media platforms on a typical day. Ratio data will be collected from responses that range from “less than one hour per

day” to “five or more hours per day”. The following platforms will be defined as social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, and LinkedIn (Pew Research Center, 2015; The Nielsen Company, 2017). For correlational purposes, the questionnaire will also include demographic data such as gender, age, and year of study.

Instrumentation - Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) and Social Phobia Scale (SPS). The Social Interaction Anxiety Scale and the Social Phobia Scale, developed by Mattick and Clark (1998) are companion measurements frequently used in the assessment of social anxiety (Norberg, Norton, Olivier, & Zvolensky, 2010; Parade, Leerkes, & Blankson, 2010; Shaw, Timpano, Tran, & Joormann, 2015; Weidman, et al., 2012). They are often used together because each test measures one of two correlated aspects of social anxiety (Mattick & Clarke, 1998). The SIAS has statements related to general anxiety associated with social interactions; the SPS has statements associated with the fear of being scrutinized by others. Considering that social anxiety is characterized by constructs of generalized anxiety brought on by social interactions, as well as fears of public scrutiny, short forms of both assessments, the SIAS-6 and SAS-6, will be used.

Design. To determine whether a positive relationship exists between time spent using social media among emerging adults and social anxiety, the study will use a correlational research design. This type of design will evaluate whether an increase in social media use correlates positively with an increase in social anxiety. Correlational studies have allowed researchers to investigate whether an association exists between various uses of the Internet and psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and self-esteem (Bano, Ahmad, & Ali, 2012; Kittinger, Correia, & Irons, 2012; Lin, et al., 2016; Lukindo, 2016; Mahapatra & Schatz, 2015; Prizant-Passal, Shechner, & Aderka, 2016; Shaw, Timpano, Tran, & Joormann, 2015;

Weidman, et al., 2012; Woods & Scott, 2016). The findings of these studies have laid the groundwork for further research into the possible causal relationship between these variables.

Statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics will be computed to provide a statistical view of the sample. Pearson r correlation will be applied to measure the strength of the relationship between social media use and social anxiety. Regression analysis will measure the linear relationship between these variables.

Control features. It is possible that an extraneous variable may be responsible for any relationship found between social media use and social anxiety. However, to control for internal validity, an online anonymous survey will be used to minimize experimenter bias and subject effect. This will facilitate more honest answers from the participants. To help control for external validity and therefore make generalizations to the greater population of emerging adults, the sample will include a demographically diverse group of undergraduate and graduate students.

Limitations of Research Design

The correlational research design used in this study will not determine the causation between the variables (Jackson, 2016). Hence, no inferences will be made about whether an increase in the time spent using social media causes an increase in social anxiety. The instruments to be used in this study will rely on self-report measures which may not accurately reflect feelings and behaviors, thus affecting the validity of the research. There is also a lack of a feasible instrument with sound psychometric properties to measure social media use. Although Olufadi (2016) created the first validated instrument for this purpose, the length of the assessment is not feasible to use with this population. Finally, if participants have short but frequent interactions with social media platforms throughout the day, it may be difficult for them to calculate a precise estimate of total daily time spent using social media.

Importance of Research

Social anxiety is a common mental health problem that often goes undiagnosed (Zakri, 2015). Emerging adults experience higher rates of social anxiety than the general public, with clinical levels between 19-33% (Parade, Leerkes, & Blankson, 2010). Social anxiety has been linked with lower academic achievement (Brook & Willoughby, 2015), antisocial and aggressive behavior (Twenge, 2013), and increased motivation to drink alcohol (Cludius, Stevens, Bantin, Gerlach, & Hermann, 2013). Furthermore, college students are presenting with various signs of problematic Internet use (Twenge, 2013). Research from Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham (2012) suggest that emerging adults are using social media as a way to alleviate stress. Yet, an association between social media and social anxiety might suggest that social media actually exacerbates social anxiety symptoms.

Implications and Contribution to Field of Counseling

This research has important clinical implications. It would help determine whether assessments for young adults with social anxiety should include their usage of social media and the possibility that it may be a contributing factor to their symptoms. Early intervention is especially important among young adults, given that social anxiety symptoms often present in adolescence (Zakri, 2015). This research would also open discussions about treatments that could abate the symptomatology of social anxiety associated with social media.

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