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Social Media Use Among College Students and its Contribution to Depression

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Abstract

Social media is becoming a more ubiquitous method of communication and interaction in society than in the past, especially among college students. This study seeks to understand how content related to themes of Friends, Couples, Personal Achievement, and Accidents on social media contributes to depressive feelings among currently enrolled students. In an electronic survey, 92 participants ($n = 92$) responded to 9 questions from the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) in reaction to Facebook posts under the themes of Friends, Couples, Personal Achievement, and Accidents. A repeated-measures ANOVA was used and demonstrated that social media posts do affect feelings of sadness and discontent, especially in the thematic areas of Couples and Personal Achievement for college students. Statistical analysis also revealed that the thematic areas of Friends and Accidents were as similar in their depressive effects as the thematic areas of Couples and Personal Achievement. Results advocate that more research is needed on how specific themes of social-media posts affect depression levels in college students.

Social Media Use Among College Students and Its Contribution to Depression

Consistently checking Facebook, updating Snapchat stories, and adding new photos on Instagram seem to be consistent habits of society today. Using these various forms of social media is a new medium for people to promote their self-images and keep others updated on their lives. This trend has become significantly common among young adults and adolescents (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2016) that an estimated 90% are on some form of social media (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Another norm for many societies during this time is young adults attending places of higher education at universities and colleges (Seibert, Kraimer, Holtom, & Pierotti, 2013). Many attend universities as undergraduates and graduates with the hopes of furthering their educations and working toward specific career goals (Seibert et al., 2013).

Although driven by a plethora of motives like future careers, desires to succeed, and life-long dreams, college students face many difficulties as they adjust to new academic climates and prepare to make large life-decisions that will affect their futures. Unlike their idealized and picturesque portrayals of themselves online (Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015), they must juggle attending classes, working to pay for living expenses, worrying about taking care of themselves physically, studying for tests, and making time for recreational and social time. With the onslaught of these and many other trials, some students may become overwhelmed and depressed by their situations. In fact, Schnetzer, Schulenberg, and Buchanan (2013) found that 30% of college students have exhibited signs of serious depressive symptoms that significantly affect normal social, physical, and psychological functioning.

In this day, the use of social media to connect and communicate with friends has become a large phenomenon throughout the entire world. Among these users, 90% of young adults have been found using social media on a daily basis, anywhere from a few minutes to multiple hours (Lin et al., 2016). For many college students, most of their past-time can be seen as using social media in varying forms like Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, and Twitter.

Although it is seemingly harmless, Zhang et al. (2014) found that students who engaged in large amounts of these kinds of activities were more dissatisfied with their lives and depressed than those who played sports or were involved in other interactive activities. Understanding the role that social media plays in the psyche of college students could help researchers find and understand an etiology behind the depressive symptoms beleaguering college students.

Previous Research

The amount of depressed college students throughout the United States has become a factor of concern among researchers and universities. Moreno et al. (2012) found that 56% of students attending college experience symptoms of depression, which can in turn lead to serious maladaptive habits like substance abuse, suicidal idealization, and alcoholism (Deady, Mills, Teesson, & Kay-Lambkin, 2016). With the exponential uprising in social-media use throughout the world, psychologists and researchers have become interested in the depressive effects of social media use, especially as this form of communication has become one of the most prominent forms of communication among college students (Lin et al., 2016; McClosely, Iwanicki, Lauterback, Giammittorio, & Maxwell, 2015).

Various studies have shown how social media has impacted the lives of college students. Becker, Alzahabi, and Hopwood (2013) in their research found that college students are using social media to such a large extent that they are multi-tasking like never before with an increase of 119% in multi-tasking in the last decade. Students are less likely to be able to sit and focus on one task, instead needing constant distractions because social media has affected their ability to completely concentrate on one task. Lin et al. (2016) also found how social media use for college students has started to shape the identity and norms for young adults as they are able to communicate with and see the lives of other individuals. In fact, the ability to connect with and view anyone's life, from friends in school to contemporary celebrities, has become a norm due to the unlimited social network provided by social media (Cavazos-

Rehg et al., 2016). Clearly, social media is changing the way college students are behaving and viewing the world.

With the better understanding of the effects of social media on college students, researchers are beginning to wonder if social media is contributing to heightening levels of depression among college students. Moreno and others (2012) found that social media use, specifically Facebook, is playing a role in depression for college students. Although Facebook use was not considered the predictor of depression, research revealed how social media sites allow for young adults to more honestly disclose their feelings and express themselves than they might in person. Analyses of more than a thousand posts from college students from two universities displayed a significant number of posts containing depressive content in line with a clinical diagnosis of depression. Moreno et al. (2015) ascribed such a large amount of depressed content to the fact that many students and people alike view depression and other psychological disorders as stigmatized and are too afraid to receive help (Youn et al., 2013). Thus, social media can act as a place where students who are struggling can express themselves more easily than they could if physically in person (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2016; Moreno et al., 2012).

In line with previous research that social media use doesn't directly correlate with levels of depression, Tandoc et al. (2015) also looked at the effects of Facebook use for college students. Understanding depression through social rank theory, Tandoc and his researchers (2015) saw how social media would lead to depression as users would compare themselves to others they were viewing online. If a person saw himself or herself as less successful than another person, that "envy" (p. 140) would lead to highly depressed feelings. Facebook and other social media sites are seen as a place to portray oneself in a positive light, so if users are constantly checking up on these sites only to feel inadequate compared to their friends, these users are more likely to feel depressed under social rank theory and see these posters as more successful and happier than themselves (Lin et al., 2016; Tandoc et al., 2015).

With the rise in both debilitating depression and social media use among college students, researchers have become more interested in understanding how the two affect each other and if there is a relationship between social media use and depression. While many studies have indicated that social media can contribute to depression, other studies have yielded conflicting research that social media use can also decrease levels of depression by providing online support for people (Lin et al., 2016; McCloskey et al., 2015; Tandoc et al., 2015; Tran, Uebelacker, Wenzel, Collins, & Broughton, 2015). Further research still needs to be done on how media content on these sites plays a part in evoking feelings of depression (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2016; Moreno et al., 2012).

Current Research

Given the previous findings on the harmful effects of social media on users and the need to further understand if social media use is negative, this study seeks to further test the impact that social media can play in feelings of depression among college students. In the present study, we seek to understand how the successful and self-promoting posts of friends on social media like Facebook can cause depressive feelings in college students as the higher density of successes posts and self-building posts of peers may cause symptoms such as low self-esteem, harboring feelings of envy toward the person posting (Tandoc et al., 2015), and desiring to post on social media in order to get more social recognition. This study will seek to develop insight on how prevalence of social-media use can contribute to levels of depression and how users psychologically respond to a variety of common-themed posts like Friends, Personal Achievement, Couples, and Accidents (negative life events) that appear on social media feeds.

Methods

Participants

Ninety-two current college students ($n = 92$) were surveyed from October 31 through November 10 throughout the United States and asked to participate in this study (69% Female, 31% Male). Of the total sample, sixty-three ($n = 63$) completed the full survey and were included in the data analysis below. There was a 6% response rate from the total participants offered the survey on Facebook and Learning Suite. 86% of respondents were White while 5% were Latino and another 5% Multi-Cultural. Ages for participants ranged from 18 to older than 25. Those involved were all assigned to respond to the same survey and received my friendship for completing the online survey.

Instruments

For understanding the depressive effects that media can contribute on individuals, this survey used 9 Likert-type questions from the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). Each of the items was self-reported on a five-point scale (Strongly agree, agree, neither disagree or agree, disagree, and strongly disagree). Previous reliability coefficients for the BDI ranged from .73 to .92 with a mean of .86 (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988), yielding high internal consistency.

Procedure

Participants signed up for this Qualtrics survey via the social media webpage Facebook or Brigham Young University's student-academic page Learning Suite. Upon agreeing to take part in this study and verifying that they were currently enrolled in college, students were presented with 15 samples of actual social media posts (i.e. pictures, status-updates, etc.), whose permission to use for this survey's content was individually acquired. Content was selected to fit under one of four different themes: Friendship, Couples, Personal Achievement, and Accidents. Subjects were prompted to respond to the 9 Likert-style questions adapted from the BDI for each social media post followed by demographic questions.

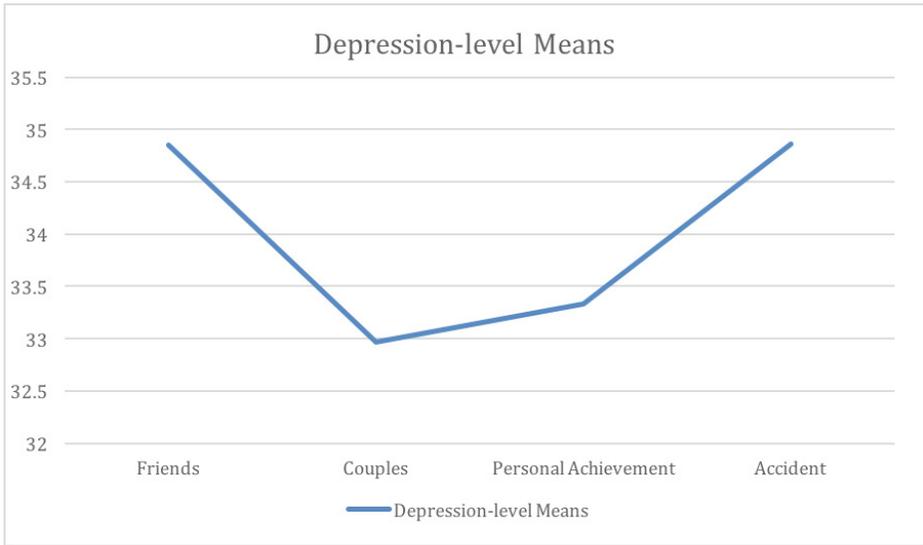
Results

Sixty-three respondents were included in the data analysis of this survey. Due to technical difficulties of the online-survey service, Qualtrics, not correctly displaying all the content of the questionnaire to respondents, 29 responses were not included. Possible scores for this questionnaire ranged from 9, strongly agreeing that they felt depressed toward the subject, to 45, strongly disagreeing that they were depressed after seeing the presented image. When grouping each post by theme, mean and standard deviations were high for each category: (1) Friends ($M = 34.85$, $SD = 3.86$), (2) Couples ($M = 32.97$, $SD = 5.02$), (3) Personal Achievement ($M = 33.33$, $SD = 4.09$), and (4) Accidents ($M = 34.86$, $SD = 3.86$), which indicate that participants did not feel depressive feelings resulting from social media content.

A repeated-measures ANOVA test was used to see if viewing social media was influential in feelings of depression and further, if any category of social media were more impactful. Analysis revealed that $F(3, 48) = 9.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .36$. Using a Bonferroni post hoc test, significant differences between Friends and Couples ($p < .0009$), Friends and Personal Achievement ($p < .001$), Couples and Accidents ($p < .025$), and Personal Achievement and Accidents ($p < .025$) were established. Between Friends and Accidents, as well as between Couples and Personal Achievement, there were no significant differences. This indicates some similarity in depressive effects of social media content related to Friends and Accidents as well as Personal Achievement and Couples. Figure 1 represents these results.

Figure 1

Estimated Marginal Means Between 4 Categories



Discussion

This study was intended to measure the extent to which social-media content caused depressive feelings and thoughts among current college students. It was hypothesized that seeing posts concerning Friends, Couples, Personal Achievement, and Accidents would evoke feelings of sadness in the viewer. A repeated-measures ANOVA mildly supported this claim that social media in these areas can cause feelings of unhappiness. Means in each of the four categories were generally toward the higher possible score of 45, indicating low levels of depression felt by the respondents. Although higher means were found, average scores were low enough to yield some moderate saddening effects. A Bonferroni post hoc revealed that the categories of Friends and Accidents were alike in their emotionally upsetting effect while Couple related content was as influentially depressing as Personal Achievement related content. Responses indicated that posts concerning the achievements of others and especially couples led to more self-critical and depressive thoughts (See Figure 1). These findings may

be supportive of the assertions of Tandoc et al. (2015) that social media is most emotionally harmful because users harbor feelings of envy toward a romantic couple or a successful peer, who posts their happiness or prosperity for their friends to see. These friends, who may not share the same accomplishments or love life, may feel like they are less successful or unsuccessful than their friends and in turn develop lower self-esteem and a depressive outlook. Therefore, the more time spent looking at these common-themed posts on social media may contribute to higher level of depression.

In accordance to past experiments, this article supports the prevalent findings among researchers that social media has a depressive effect on users, especially college students. This study took past investigations further as it focused less on the amount of social media use and depression to how four specific and common themes may influence sadness. Because of its new direction, this study had limitations. Content and sampling for this test were collected all from the same Facebook page, indicating that many of the participants may have known the individuals featured in the study's questions. Responses from respondents may have been biased by knowing or having previous feelings toward them rather than answering questions impartially or unbiased. Along with this, another limitation was that 41 of the 63 respondents (81%) were attending Brigham Young University. Because most of the participation came from one school, findings are not generalizable to the entire college-student population.

In looking to improve the future of this test, a larger and more diversified sample should be collected to better represent the desired population of all college students and the effects of social media on their depression levels. In addition, we would focus on what specifically about these images and their themes led respondents to feel unhappy—a more qualitative approach. The next test could include under each image an open-response box for participants to say what about each image led them to answer the way they did.

Findings in this study may support past research that social media contributes to depression among college students and add to

the current field by looking at how the themes of Friends, Couples, Personal Achievements, and Accidents affect depression. It is interesting to note how of these four, couple relationships promoted the most sadness among viewers. The results also advocate that further research is needed to understand why these specific themes cause differing levels of unhappiness, because significant differences were found. Better understanding how social media affects college students can facilitate and improve treating and supporting college students during this important stage of their lives.

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