

The relationship between social media use and depression

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Abstract: In order to delve into the relationship between social media and depression, this paper looks at the following areas of analysis. Firstly, the literature on the relationship between social media and depression was reviewed to understand how social media may contribute to depression. Secondly, an understanding of what people with depression need most and their social media use habits was developed. Then, literature related to social media was read to understand the positive impact social media has on people psychologically and whether this positive impact fits the psychological needs of people with depression. The conclusion is that relationship between social media and depression is in fact correlational rather than causal.

Key words: social media, depression

In recent years, there have been many tragic cases of psychological problems in society, and the psychological problems of some special groups of people have received much attention. Social media is inseparable from our lives and it has a great impact on the psychological aspect of people's lives. One of the illnesses that can result from mental health problems is depression. Depression is the most common mental disorder in people who die by suicide. Therefore, it is essential to explore the relationship between social media and depression.

A large proportion of scholars currently studying social media are concerned with the aspect of the negative impact of social media. On aspects of the relationship between social media and depression, most are dedicated to exploring how social media contributes to depression and trying to minimise the negative effects of social media. But the relationship between depression and social media may not be so simply single-directed. Could it be possible that it is not only the use of social media that leads to depression? Maybe people with depression may use social media more than the general population.

The literature included studies on the characteristics of people with depression and their media use habits. Prins state that people with depression prefer psychological interventions to medication and chemical profiles. Other scholar state that depressed people want to improve their emotional, cognitive and behavioral health through self-regulation. The cognitive factors associated with depression are self-image, world image, and expectations of the future. Some scholars suggested that social media use may contribute to depression. Using social media at night can lead to poorer sleep quality, partly due to the nighttime alerts that can affect sleep quality and also because the phone alerts can give young people pressure to reply to messages. Meanwhile, poorer sleep quality is a cause of depression. One mediator of the relationship between social media use and depressive symptoms is sleep difficulties. Anxiety has a significant negative impact on several aspects of depression and cognitive functioning. This type of literature show a clear understanding of how existing research has examined the relationship between depression and social media and what are some of the reasons why social media may contribute to depression.

Existing research points to the following reasons why social media causes depression. Firstly, Social media is a source of sleep disturbance. Poor sleep quality is an important factor in depression. Some scholar proposed that increased use of social media will lead to poorer sleep quality. Social media use has an impact on sleep quality in two ways. Some people sleep with their mobile phone next to their pillow and the sound of their phone alerts during the night is most likely to disturb sleep. The other way is that young people will feel fearful about missing messages, so they cannot fully relax into sleep due to the fear of not being able to respond to messages immediately. Secondly, those who feel relatively low in social support are more likely to suffer from depression compared to those who have high social support from their family and friends. Social media is a non-face-to-face form of interaction, and the emotions associated with this interaction are somewhat weaker than those associated with face-to-face interactions. This is highly likely to make people feel isolated which means less socially supported. Finally, social media weakening people's ability to focus and leading to depression. Carr suggests that social media weakens both the ability to focus and contemplate. The use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter can make it more difficult for people to stay focused. Whether or not attention is focused is also a factor in whether or not people become depressed.

In fact, all three of these points could suggest that there is a correlation between social media and depression. However, apart from suggesting that there is a mere relationship between social media and depression, it does not entirely prove that there is a causal relationship between them. Firstly, in studies of social media and sleep quality, it is true that social media use may affect sleep quality, but it is also possible that people who do not sleep well may use social media more as a sleep aid. Furthermore, social media use is not the only factor that affects sleep quality, as eating caffeinated foods and exercising vigorously before bedtime can also affect sleep quality. The second point is that social media can lead to people feeling less socially supported due to its non-face-to-face format of interaction. However, Seabrook et al found an inverse relationship between the feeling of being supported and depressed mood brought about by online interactions on social media. Deters and Mehl also suggest that social media has the advantage of enabling people to express their thoughts and feelings and to receive social support. The third point concerns the relationship between social media and people's ability to concentrate. While inattention can cause social media users to experience increased intangible stress leading to depression, inattention has little effect on stress, which has a broader and more direct cause. People achieve a kind of mental reset when they transition from what they are doing at the time to another

activity after feeling stressed, allowing tight nerves to be relieved. In addition, if social media apps cause addiction and interfere with normal life, some people will take the initiative to delete the apps themselves to control their social media use in a self-regulatory way.

So, do people with depression actually use social media more? Beck proposed a “cognitive triad” of factors associated with depression, with three elements: self-image, world image, and expectations of the future. In terms of self-image, depressed people tend to magnify their shortcomings and view themselves negatively. They often feel less present and more isolated. In terms of the image of the world, people with depression can have more difficulty accepting society than the average person, increasing feelings of rejection and unfriendly views of the world at large. Through the use of social media, as people are posting what they think is good about themselves on social platforms, this sharing in itself can have a positive impact. In terms of personal expectations of the future, people with depression have a deep sense of despair, a negative attitude towards the future and no hope for the future. Many people post their relevant experiences and achievements on social media platforms for reference. Because there is a common topic of interest, when people with depression see that someone has related experiences and has achieved something, it boosts their self-confidence, thus alleviating their feelings of despair about the future. Another reason is most people with depression believe that psychological interventions are more effective treatments than both medications as well as chemotherapy. Managing emotions is an important part of mental health interventions. This is one of the strategies used to self-regulate emotions.

In conclusion, the relationship between social media and depression is in fact correlational rather than causal. People with depression also use social media more often due to its characteristics. Although the use of social media can affect the quality of sleep, making people feel less socially supported and affecting concentration. However, social media can also be used as a form of sleep support, using social networking interactions to enhance feelings of support and to relax tense nerves. In addition, social media has a positive effect on all cognitive factors related to depression. And social media is used as a form of psychological intervention to treat depression. This paper provides a basis for subsequent research on the relationship between social media and depression, from which endless ‘next steps’ can be imagined. It is also possible to compare depressed people with the general population and test whether there is a significant difference in the amount of time they spend using social media.

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