Social Media Impact on Social Connectedness, Well-Being, and

Self-Perception Among Young Adults

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May 1, 2023

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Introduction

As new social media platforms continue to be created, an increasing number of adolescents frequently engage in online outlets. As of 2022, 97% of teens say they use the internet daily, with the most common platforms visited being YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat (Vogels et al., 2022). As the number of adolescents who visit these platforms continues to rise, there have been various concerns raised over the years about the potential negative impact social media can have on the user, with extensive research being conducted on the adverse effects. There has been apprehension over the amount of time teens spend on social media, cyberbullying, and using online platforms to compare themselves to others. Although a significant amount of research focuses on and presents the negative impacts of social media, there are multiple positive aspects that can arise from these platforms, and it is important to consider these, as well.

Adolescents have identified various aspects of social media that have had a positive impact on their lives, such as allowing them to feel more connected to their friends, more accepted, and that they have a support network (Anderson et al., 2022). As of 2022, 8 in 10 teens say that what they see on social media allows them to feel more connected to the happenings in their friends' lives, and that 67% say those platforms make them feel like they have a network that can support them during difficult times. Aside from social connectedness, Anderson and colleagues (2022) found that 71% of teens say that social platforms provide them with a creative outlet. Although extensive research on the adverse effects of social media use is necessary, acknowledging the positives can be just as beneficial and is essential for further understanding the current state of online platforms and the well-being of the adolescents and young adults who use them.

First, this paper will discuss previous research that has examined the impact social media can have on body image and how online platforms have played a role in encouraging body positivity. Then, it will discuss research comparing social media intensity and the differences between active and passive use when engaging with online platforms. Next, this paper will examine social media use and its impact on psychological well-being, particularly self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. Finally, it will describe the current study, which collected data from a sample of young adults to assess how social media has impacted their social connectedness, well-being, and self-perception.

Social Media Impact on Body Image

Substantial research has examined the impact social media can have on an individual's body image and how these social platforms have been utilized to shape society's unrealistic beauty ideals (Barron et al., 2021). Although extensive research has been conducted on the negative impact the internet can have on body image, studies have also identified ways to encourage positive body image through social media (Barron et al., 2021; Escobar-Viera et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2020). Various movements have emerged through the creation of these platforms and their impact on beauty standards, focusing on encouraging fitness among people and body positivity. Several research studies have examined these various movements and their impact on an individual's body image and emotional well-being (Barron et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2020).

One such movement, fitspiration (a combination of the words fitness and inspiration), emerged, which refers to "material that is created to motivate individuals to engage in exercise and to strive for a healthier lifestyle" (Barron et al., 2021, p. 15). Barron and colleagues (2021) were interested in examining the effects of viewing "fitspiration" images and images of

self-compassion quotes on men's and women's body image and self-compassion. Four conditions were included: (1) a "fitspiration" image set, (2) a self-compassion image set, (3) a combined "fitspiration" and self-compassion image set, and (4) a control group of an architecture image set. Fitspiration images were defined as images that included people with toned and muscular bodies, whereas self-compassion images depicted a quote (e.g., "It's okay to take a break") with no bodies pictured. The findings of this study indicated that self-compassion was only effective when used alone rather than in conjunction with fitspiration images. The participants exposed to the self-compassion image set reported higher levels of state body satisfaction and body appreciation among both men and women (Barron et al., 2021).

Aside from the rise of the fitspiration movement, body-positive content has been steadily increasing and gaining traction on social media platforms. Body positivity (BoPo) has been utilized on image-centric platforms to encourage individuals to challenge existing beauty ideals and view their bodies for what they can *do* rather than the aesthetic qualities of the body (Stevens & Griffiths, 2020). Research has been conducted examining the potential benefits body positivity content can have on an individual's psychological well-being. Stevens and Griffiths (2020) administered an assessment containing self-report measures of BoPo exposure, body satisfaction at the given moment, and current mental health state. Similarly to Barron and colleagues (2021), participants exposed to content that encouraged a love for themselves and their body, in this instance, BoPo content, reported higher body satisfaction and positive affect. Findings included a positive association between the mean number of exposures to BoPo content and positive affect (Stevens & Griffiths, 2020). As a result, the experimenters suggested that viewing BoPo content may lead individuals to experience a general sense of positivity and feel more positive about their appearance.

Passive vs. Active Social Media Use: The Effects of Intensity on Well-Being

In addition to body image, other positive effects of social media use include psychological well-being and self-esteem, particularly in relation to the intensity of one's use of social media platforms. As of 2022, internet users worldwide spend an average of 2 hours and 27 minutes daily using social media (Dixon, 2022). Due to the growing concern about the amount of time spent on social media, researchers have been interested in examining the impact of social media intensity and how individuals engage with these platforms. Social media intensity refers to how often individuals use these online platforms daily. Several studies have focused on identifying the implications social media can have on psychological well-being and self-esteem, particularly in relation to intensity and active vs. passive use (Roberts & David, 2022; Trifiro & Prena, 2021). For these studies, it was important for the researchers to distinguish the differences between active and passive use. Active use is defined as involving some form of direct interaction or communication with others, such as sharing information, "liking" posts, or commenting on images. On the other hand, passive use refers to individuals who scroll through their social media feeds and consume information about other people's lives while interacting very little with others (Roberts & David, 2022).

Roberts and David (2022) conducted studies examining the relationship between social media intensity and the type of usage; and testing the relationships between intense or heavy use of social media, perceived social connection, and well-being. From these studies, results indicated that social media intensity was associated with social connectedness. In particular, social media use was positively associated with social connection when passive use was low (i.e., users were engaging and interacting with others more). These results suggest that higher social media intensity and more active social media use were associated with higher levels of

social connection and, ultimately, psychological well-being, such as forming positive relationships with others and finding self-acceptance. On the other hand, lower intensity and more passive use were associated with lower levels of social connection, decrements in psychological well-being, and, indirectly, stress (Roberts & David, 2022).

Trifiro and Prena (2021) found similar results to Roberts and David (2022), depicting a positive relationship between social media intensity and well-being. Results from their study indicated that there was a positive correlation between active Instagram usage and user levels of self-esteem. Additionally, results indicated a significant indirect effect of active use on self-esteem through intensity. Those results suggest that those who identified as more active users used social media more intensely and, in turn, had higher self-esteem. Furthermore, there was a positive correlation between active Instagram usage and user well-being. Another significant indirect effect of active use on well-being through intensity was found. Those who identified as more active users used social media more intensely and, as a result, displayed higher levels of well-being (Trifiro & Prena, 2021).

With active and intense social media use, individuals are provided with a platform to engage in online communities. Lee and Cho (2019) found that higher levels of intensity of social media use and online community use led to more positive psychological well-being and lower levels of depression through the mediation of instrumental support (i.e., practical help in specific instances of need). Additionally, social media use intensity positively and significantly predicted instrumental, informational, and appraisal support within these online communities (Lee & Cho, 2019).

The Effects of Social Media on Self-Esteem, Depression, and Anxiety

In addition to understanding the impact of social media intensity on psychological well-being, self-esteem, and social connectedness, many researchers have studied the potential effects social media can have on an individual's mental health. When focusing on mental health, research has been conducted on how these platforms may impact self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.

<u>Self-esteem</u>

One of the most researched topics concerning social media is its impact on self-esteem and self-worth (Escobar-Viera et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2021). An individual's level of self-esteem is formed by various aspects of their life, such as their relationship with their body, support from others, and their ability to form connections with others. Escobar-Viera and colleagues (2021) were interested in exploring the positive and negative effects that social media can have on an individual's mental well-being and, in turn, on their self-esteem. They were particularly interested in the impacts of social media on LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) persons compared to non-LGB persons. To categorize participants' responses on their experiences with social media, a codebook was designed to provide meaning to the concepts discussed, with 23 codes established. Ten codes were categorized as positive effects (e.g., social connectedness, social capital, SM emotional support), 11 were negative effects (e.g., bullying, negative body image, social isolation), and two were categorized as "informational purposes" (Escobar-Viera et al., 2020).

Most codes identified in responses described positive effects from both non-LGB (49.5%) and LGB participants (48.4%). However, some negative effect codes were also found in responses from both non-LGB (36.7%) and LGB participants (43.6%). Of those negative effect

codes, negative emotional contagion, real-life repercussions, and profile management were significantly more frequent among LGB participants. Among both groups, social capital, social connectedness, and long-distance connections were most frequently identified, with social capital appearing more frequently in LGB participants. Other positive effects that were common in responses for both groups were a sense of emotional support, positive emotional contagion, identity formation, and positive body image (Escobar-Viera et al., 2020). These results suggest that these positive codes identified in social media use, such as a sense of emotional support and positive body image, positively impact individuals' mental well-being and, in turn, benefit their self-esteem, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Time spent on social media platforms also impacts adolescents' self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Valkenburg and colleagues (2021) had participants complete surveys regarding their self-esteem, time spent on social media, and the valence of their experiences while using social media. In addition, the study required participants to complete peer approval and appearance contingencies surveys regarding their self-esteem. To measure peer approval, participants were presented with two statements: "I feel more satisfied about myself… (a) when others praise me and (b) when I get a lot of attention from others." For the appearance contingencies, the following two statements were used: "I feel more satisfied about myself… (a) when I think I am looking good and (b) when I think I am attractive" (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Participants were given response options ranging from completely agree to do not agree at all.

Valkenburg and colleagues' (2021) experiment yielded similar results to Escobar-Viera and colleagues' (2020) research regarding the impact of positive experiences on self-esteem. Across all survey responses on the valence of social media, 55% of the participants' experiences were positive, and adolescents with more positive social media had higher levels of self-esteem.

On the other hand, 18% of the participants' experiences were negative, while 27% of experiences were scored as neutral. Additionally, results found that more qualitative measures, such as interactions with friends on social media, yielded positive relations with self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2021).

Depression

Another aspect of social media that has been researched is the impact it can have on depression, either increasing levels of depression or contributing to lower levels (Lee & Cho, 2019). Regarding social media use, levels of depression and provided social support often go hand-in-hand and can significantly impact one another. In their experiment, Lee and Cho (2019) focused on people with physical disabilities and on four types of social support in relation to depression: emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. The findings of this research indicated that higher levels of intensity of social media use and online community led to lower levels of depression through the mediation of instrumental support (practical help in specific instances of need). In addition, the mediation of informational support (providing information that can guide someone through their problems) was found to lead to lower levels of depression. Furthermore, focus groups revealed that social media and online communities gave participants new opportunities to engage in social interactions they were lacking offline, and those communities, in particular, helped participants to obtain informational and emotional support. The study's results suggest that online communities can play a critical role in providing support for individuals they may not receive elsewhere, which can further contribute to lower levels of depression (Lee & Cho, 2019).

__Anxiety__

Social media can also play an integral role in aiding people with social anxiety in forming friendships and interpersonal connections through methods that may feel more comfortable and safe (Scott et al., 2022). Social media platforms have acted as a protection for people of all ages with their potential for anonymity and have allowed individuals to have a sense of control in an online environment that may not be achievable in in-person situations (Scott et al., 2022). Online communities and platforms have particularly benefited people with social anxiety who struggle to engage with people in person and form relationships. Scott and colleagues (2022) aimed to examine the relationship between the perceptions of protection and control in the online environment in young adults with social anxiety and their social connectedness and social Internet use. The study's findings indicated that social Internet use was significantly and positively associated with social connectedness in both those who are socially anxious and those with low-moderate social anxiety. Additionally, there was a positive association between control (e.g., allowing them to decide what information they can present about themselves) and social Internet use for both groups. The study's results provide evidence that individuals who are anxious about connecting with others in offline situations interpret the Internet and social media platforms as a space where they can feel safe and more in control of any interactions they may have and how they present themselves (Scott et al., 2022).

The current literature pertaining to the various effects of social media focuses primarily on the negative impacts of social media, with very little research focusing on the potential benefits and positives that social media can produce. Although some research has been conducted on the positive effects of social media, such as a focus on body-positive content (Stevens & Griffiths, 2020) and the impact that online platforms can have on depression (Lee &

Cho, 2019) or anxiety (Scott et al., 2022), not enough studies have considered or attempted to examine how social media can positively impact aspects of an individual's well-being.

In order to assess whether or not the social media habits of typical college students can have positive effects, it is important to word the questions with a positive framework. For example, instead of focusing questions on low self-esteem and body image, it would be interesting to measure agreement with statements that assert body positivity and high self-esteem. For example, "My feelings toward my body are positive for the most part" and "I feel that I am a person of worth." Additionally, there is a lack of studies that measure the effects of social media on multiple aspects of young adult life. Therefore, the current study attempted to address those gaps by assessing relationships among social media usage, the intensity of usage, body image, self-esteem, anxiety and depression, *and* social connectedness. Additionally, the survey used a positive framework for most of the questions.

Method

Participants

Participants included 112 undergraduate students (85F, 19M, 6 Non-binary, 1 Trans woman, and one genderfluid). Of these participants, 36 were college freshmen, 20 were sophomores, 27 were juniors, and 28 were seniors. Eighty-three participants were from New Jersey, 27 were from other states in the U.S., and two were international.

Procedure

<u>The Survey</u>

Participants filled out a 75-question survey on Google Forms regarding how they use social media, including how often they use various social media platforms and in what manner. For example, participants were asked to answer the following questions: "How many years have

you been using social media?," "At what age did you start using social media?," and "What social media platforms do you use?" followed by asking them which platform they use the *most*. For example, these platforms included Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, Facebook, BeReal, and Reddit. Furthermore, participants were asked about their reasons for using social media and what motivated their usage the *most*. These possible motivations included "To stay connected with my friends," "To stay up to date on pop culture," and "To seek support from people who are like me," to name a few.

Additionally, the survey measured body image, self-esteem, anxiety and depression, and social connectedness. For example, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements centering around body image, such as, "Despite my flaws, I accept my body for what it is," "My self-worth is independent of my body shape or weight," and "I do not regularly worry about what other people think of my appearance." To measure self-esteem, statements included "I feel I have a lot to be proud of," "I do not worry about how I am perceived on social media," and "I feel confident in my academic abilities." Statements regarding anxiety and depression included "I feel irritated all the time," "I feel dissatisfied with my life when I see other people living theirs," and "I have lost interest in interacting with other people." To assess social connectedness, the survey included statements such as, "I feel connected with other people most of the time," "I feel like I belong in my friend group," and "I feel comfortable interacting with new people."

Lastly, the survey measured the intensity with which participants use social media. For example, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements such as, "I feel anxious when I do not check my social media regularly," "I feel out of touch when I haven't

logged onto SNSs//Online communities for a while," and "SNSs//Online communities are part of my everyday activity."

Coding

Total scores were calculated for each of the categories, including total self-esteem, total body image, total depression and anxiety, total social connectedness, and total intensity of usage. These scores were used in subsequent calculations. Additionally, participants were divided into two groups based on their responses to their frequency of use of social media. High users were defined as those who used social media more than the median of 9.75 times per day. Low users were defined as those who used social media less than 9.75 times per day.
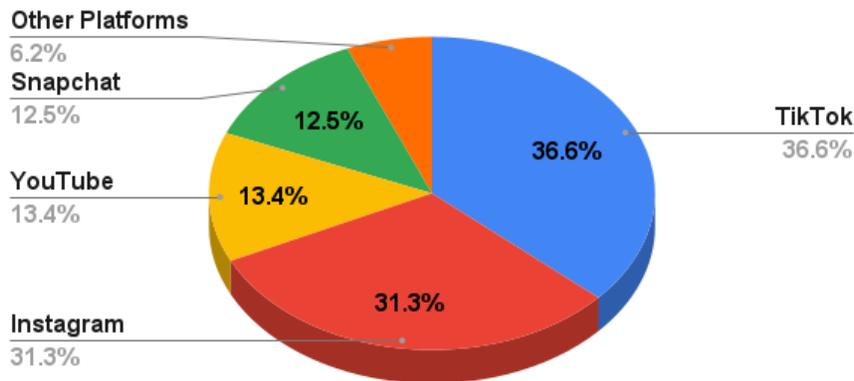
Results

Demographics

When asked about the social media platforms they use, 94.6% of participants responded with Instagram, 87.5% said Snapchat, 85.7% said YouTube, 77.7% said TikTok, and 51.8% said Twitter. Additionally, 50.9% said Facebook, 42% said BeReal, 17% said Reddit, and 3.6% said Tumblr.
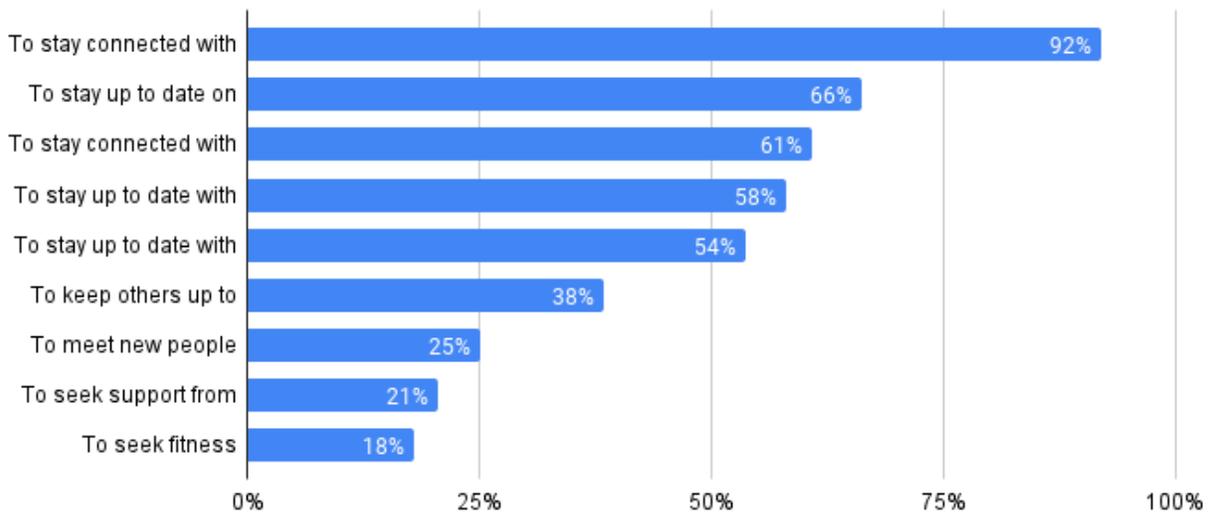
Participants were then asked to select the platform they use the *most*. 36.6% of participants chose TikTok, 31.3% chose Instagram, 13.4% chose YouTube, and 12.5% chose Snapchat.

What social media platform do you use the MOST?

Other Platforms
6.2%

Snapchat
12.5%

YouTube
13.4%

Instagram
31.3%

TikTok
36.6%

12.5%   36.6%

13.4%

31.3%

Additionally, participants were asked about their reasons for using social media. 92% of participants said they use it to stay connected with their friends, 66.1% said to stay up to date on pop culture, 60.7% said to stay connected with family, 58% said to stay up to date with world news, and 53.6% said to stay up to date with trends.

Select the reasons why you use social media (Check ALL that apply)

Reason	Percentage
To stay connected with	92%
To stay up to date on	66%
To stay connected with	61%
To stay up to date with	58%
To stay up to date with	54%
To keep others up to	38%
To meet new people	25%
To seek support from	21%
To seek fitness	18%

Participants then chose the reason that motivated them the *most* to use social media, with 57.1% of participants saying to stay connected with friends, 10.7% saying to stay up to date with

pop culture, 6.3% saying to keep others up to date with their life, 5.4% saying to stay connected with family, 4.5% saying to stay up to date with trends, and 3.6% saying to seek support from people who are like them.

Which of the following reasons motivates you to use social media the MOST?

Various reasons
12.4%
To seek support from people like me
3.6%
To stay up to date with trends
4.5%
To stay connected with family
5.4%
To keep others up to date on my life
6.3%
To stay up to date with pop culture
10.7%

12.4%

5.4%

6.3%

10.7%

57.1%

To stay connected with friends
57.1%
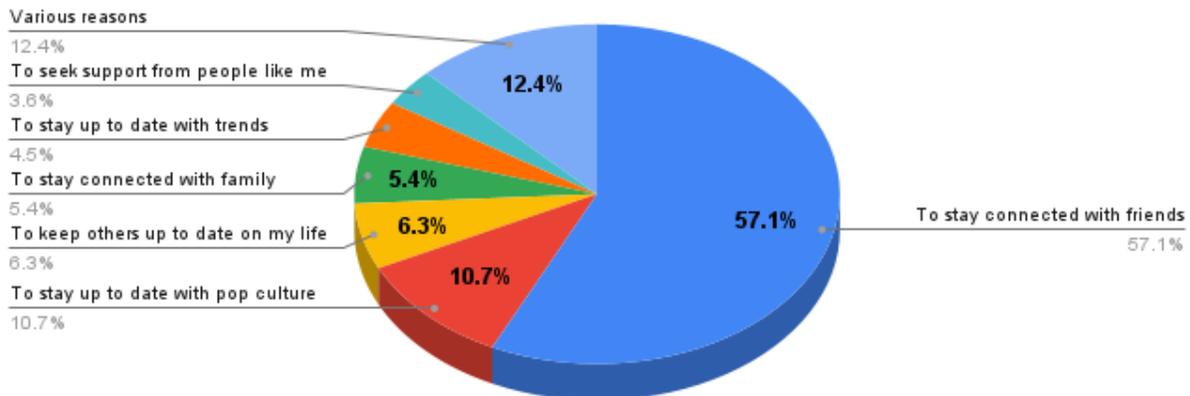
Correlations

A series of correlations were conducted to assess relationships between body image, self-esteem, depression and anxiety, social connectedness, and intensity of social media usage.

Body Image

Total body image score was positively correlated with total self-esteem score, $r = 0.6389$; $p < 0.0001$. Additionally, total body image score was positively correlated with total social connectedness score, $r = 0.3312$; $p = 0.000361$. However, total body image score was negatively correlated with total depression and anxiety score, $r = -0.4195$; $p < 0.0001$.

Self-Esteem

Regarding self-esteem, total self-esteem score was negatively correlated with total depression and anxiety score, $r = -0.5249$; $p < 0.0001$. Furthermore, total self-esteem score was negatively correlated with total intensity of social media usage score, $r = -0.2748$; $p = 0.003365$.

Total self-esteem score was also negatively correlated with total average hours of social media use score, $r = -0.2104$; $p = 0.026$, and with total average times of checking social media score, $r = -0.189$; $p = 0.05$. On the other hand, total self-esteem score was positively correlated with total social connectedness score, $r = 0.3556$; $p = 0.000119$. Total self-esteem was also positively correlated with the average time a participant can go without checking social media before feeling anxious, $r = 0.2588$; $p = 0.0068$.

Depression and Anxiety

Total depression and anxiety score was negatively correlated with total social connectedness score, $r = -0.5213$; $p < 0.0001$. However, total depression and anxiety was positively correlated with total average hours of social media use, $r = 0.2291$; $p = 0.0014$, as well as with the average time a participant can go without checking social media before feeling anxious, $r = 0.189$; $p = 0.05$.

Comparisons - High vs. Low Users

A series of independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare high users of social media with low users. Results indicated that lower users had significantly higher body image ($M = 35.32$ out of a possible 56) than higher users ($M = 30.17$), $t(104) = 2.44$, $p = 0.016$. Additionally, lower users had significantly higher self-esteem ($M = 70.0$ out of a possible 91) than higher users ($M = 63.4$), $t(104) = 2.42$, $p = 0.017$.

Higher users had significantly higher intensity scores ($M = 20.49$ out of a possible 42) than lower users ($M = 16.7$), $t(104) = -2.88$, $p = 0.005$. Unexpectedly, the mean depression score for lower users ($M = 34.6$ out of a possible 77) was not significantly different from the mean depression score for higher users ($M = 37.0$), $t(104) = -1.18$, $p > 0.05$. Nor was the mean social

connectedness score for lower users (M = 66.28 out of a possible 91) significantly different from the mean social connectedness score of higher users (M = 66.51), $t(104)$ = -0.09, $p > 0.05$.

Discussion

Summary

The results of this study found that lower social media users had higher body image and self-esteem than higher social media users. These findings contradict the previous research done by Trifiro & Prena (2021). This experiment found that higher social media users displayed higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depression than lower users. Although higher users spent significantly more time on social media than lower users, their mean depression and social connectedness scores were not significantly different. These findings contradict previous research conducted by Roberts & David (2022) and Lee & Cho (2019). These researchers found that individuals who use social media to a higher degree displayed higher levels of social connectedness and lower levels of depression than lower users.

Previous research, however, for the most part, did not look at how these various aspects of well-being interacted. A majority of the previous chose to focus on specific aspects, such as body image and self-esteem together (Escobar-Viera et al., 2020), or depression and social connectedness together (Lee & Cho, 2019). This study decided to examine how all of those topics interact with one another. For example, the study looked at the positive correlation between body image and social connectedness, and the positive correlation between self-esteem and social connectedness, which had not been previously explored.

These findings have important implications for social media use and research moving forward. While the current study's findings did not fully align with previous research, that does not mean there are no positive impacts of social media to be found. For example, although this

research may not have been able to contribute significantly to the prior research surrounding

positive social media use, the previous research does indicate that there is an area of social media

usage that promotes positive effects and impacts. Additionally, the current findings suggest that it

is important to research the relationships between social media usage and various aspects of

well-being together, such as social connectedness, depression and anxiety, and body image and

self-esteem. This research can act as a launch pad for future research and areas that may be of

interest to explore more. Overall, despite this study not being able to corroborate previous

research, it is important for society to recognize that there is a place for positive social media

impacts in research and on these platforms.

Limitations of the Current Study

There were a few limitations in the current study. Firstly, the study included an

overwhelmingly larger population of female participants (75.9%) than males (17%). In some

instances, this could have potentially skewed findings, particularly with regard to questions

surrounding body image and self-esteem. Additionally, the survey format of having participants

self-reporting their well-being allows for participants to potentially not be as truthful or honest

with their responses. That could be a result of questions or statements not being worded clearly,

not wanting to be truthful about their experiences with depression, social connectedness, etc., or

just randomly clicking answers to complete the survey faster. Finally, the statements asking

participants to rate their agreement could have tried harder to cover more niche topics in each

segment. For example, one participant reached out regarding the body image section of the

survey, explaining that their treatment of their body and the way they behave stems from wanting

to be healthy, not due to a lack of insecurity or because they enjoy being active, which should be

taken into account more.

Suggestions for Future Research

A few suggestions can be offered for future research. First, future researchers could conduct a study that consists of looking at the effects that specific social media platforms can have on an individual. While this study did ask about what social media platforms the participants used the most, each platform was not examined individually in terms of its possible impacts on users. There could be an interest in trying to pinpoint which platforms boost social connectedness or lower levels of depression as opposed to other platforms. Additionally, there could be future research conducted focusing on different aspects of well-being aside from the ones researched in this study. For example, research could focus on emotional well-being and how social media may have a positive impact on one's ability to safely express or manage their emotions; or focus on the impact social media could potentially have on one's physical well-being. Lastly, future research could examine the positive impacts social media could have on identity formation. Most social media usage begins at a time of development when identity formation is at its peak, so studying the impact of one upon the other could be crucial.

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