

Social Media Effects on Mental Well-Being Among Generations and Motivations for Use

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## Introduction

A large number of individuals use social networking sites (SNS). As of 2018, 45% of the world population was a member of at least one SNS (Mitev et al., 2021). Many different ages, genders, ethnicities, and cultures access the internet for a variety of reasons. It has been found that the main reasons for internet consumption are entertainment, communication, and social acceptance (Gaethe, 2020). Technology has opened up ways in which one's identity is affected in ways not seen before. Social media also allows for the lack of true individuality; one may present themselves online any way they like, often inaccurate to one's authentic self (Mayer et al., 2020). SNS have begun to take up a great deal of time each day, with studies reporting most individuals spend at least an hour a day on social media (Asbury, 2016).

There have been many studies attempting to examine differences among individuals, their SNS use, and their technology use in general. In terms of technology use, generational differences are often a main focus of researchers. Studies of this nature often use different ways to define these generations. This study will use the terms digital native and digital immigrant, defining digital natives as those born after 1990 and digital immigrants as those born before 1990. It has been found that digital natives think differently, have an affinity to technology, and are accustomed to receiving information at rapid rates. Children have been using technology increasingly over years, whether it be in schools or at home. This has allowed younger generations to quickly adapt and understand technology, while older generations are adapting to things they never had access to before modern-day (Asbury, 2016). The internet has only been around for a relatively short period of time, which makes it an area of high interest and many unanswered questions.

The goal of the current study is to examine the different effects of SNS on well-being in terms of personality and motives and to explore whether those impacts differ between digital immigrants and digital natives. It will first explore previous research discussing the motives behind SNS use in general. It will examine the links between well-being and social media use that have been found to date, both positive and negative. Next, it will discuss research comparing technology and SNS use in digital immigrants and in digital natives. Finally, it will examine social media use in a new, larger sample of digital natives and digital immigrants with the goal of determining whether there is a difference between the two generations in terms of the impact of SNS on their well-being.

### **Motives for SNS Use**

Several research studies have obtained results that suggest the motive behind one's SNS use plays a large role in potential outcomes on well-being (Coyne et al., 2020; Leung, 2013; Perugini & Solano, 2021). The reasons behind one's use of social media can lead researchers to understand potential benefits or setbacks from being online. It is important to examine the possible motives behind these posts as it may allow researchers to understand the popularity of SNS and its effects. Researchers have focused on two main ideas for explaining motives throughout the literature on the topic of SNS use: gratifications and personality. There are many kinds of gratifications to be found on social media; research has tried to uncover which are the biggest reasons for users to post content. These gratifications include meeting social needs, social acceptance, and entertainment (Coyne et al., 2020).

Users on social media often create their own content. This could be done by creating videos, sharing photos, or summarizing their days. Leung (2013) found that SNS focus on seven main components: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and

groups. He also reported five main motives behind using SNS: social affections, venting negative feelings, recognition needs, entertainment needs, and cognitive needs (Leung, 2013). Perugini and Solani (2021) and Leung (2013) found that social gratifications are often the motives behind SNS use.

Despite these - for the most part - positive motives behind the use of SNS, some studies suggest a link between poor mental health and increased social media use in adolescents (Gaethe, 2020; Joiner et al., 2013). This idea is also heavily represented in media, as many point to social media as the cause for increased mental health diagnoses among the youth. However, it is important to note that other studies contest this idea, saying the relationship between the two constructs is very mixed and inconclusive (Coyne et al., 2020; Mitev et al., 2021; Perugini & Solano, 2021). There is no set “normal” level of social media use in individuals, as there are extreme outliers in both directions. This makes it hard to determine if those who are experiencing mental illness are also using social media over the ‘norm’ (Coyne et al., 2020). It is important to have a complete view of the different sides of social media when it comes to any study on SSN use, however, extreme differences in variables make this hard to achieve (Leung, 2013). Research on technology use should be specific and detailed to combat the current mixed opinions in the literature.

## **SNS and Outcomes**

In addition to motivations behind SNS use, many researchers have studied the potential effects of SNS. The internet is very new, which has brought concern in psychology about how it may be negatively impacting one’s mental health.

### Negative Outcomes

#### ***Gratifications***

The displacement hypothesis and uses and gratification theory are often used to explain the negative effects of SNS. The displacement theory states that spending so much time on social media causes youth to ignore more important, beneficial needs, such as adequate sleep or social activities outside of technology (Coyne et al., 2020). Advocates of this theory believe that this may be the cause for the poor mental health reports (not necessarily social media use itself). The uses and gratification theory says that those who already have mental health issues turn to social media in order to gain social needs not met in the real world (Coyne et al., 2020). They may also use social media as a way to escape the issues occurring in their life.

In addition to the previously mentioned theories, Gaethe (2020) theorizes three explanations for some individuals showing low self-esteem linked with social media usage: the looking glass self, self-discrepancy theory, and social comparison theory. The looking glass theory states that one's self-image is based on the perception and approval of others. This allows one to gauge their acceptance in regards to their peers, this acceptance online is often seen through likes, followers, and/or comments. If an individual has a negative self-image online it will lead to them having low self-esteem (Gaethe, 2020).

Higgins developed the self-discrepancy theory in 1989 (as cited in Gaethe, 2020). This theory states that self-esteem is determined by the degree to which one's self is perceived compared to the accuracy of how they wish themselves to be. This idea is described as one's self versus the perceived self versus the ideal self. This theory questions what self is being shown by one on social media. The desire to be authentic versus the desire to portray oneself how one wants to be seen. This creates an uncomfortable feeling in individuals and leads to lower self-esteem.

The social comparison theory discusses how individuals are constantly comparing themselves to others in order to construct their self-view (Gaethe, 2020). They often seek other's opinions before they complete their own. Social media has allowed this comparison to extend past social environments into constantly being available in a person's pocket. The availability to constantly compare oneself, even when alone, has led to an increase in self-esteem issues when on social media (Gaethe, 2020).

### ***Personality as a Mediator***

It is important to note that the negative effects of SNS use may be mediated by personality. Kraut et al. (1998) found that continuous internet use results in negative mental well-being. However, in follow-up research with the original participants, this effect was shown to lessen over time depending on the participant's personality. Perugini and Solano (2021) found that personality traits were more likely to explain motive for SNS use when compared to age and gender. Previous studies have found a positive correlation between narcissistic personality and social media usage. Narcissism is a personality in which individuals see themselves in a highly unrealistically positive light. Those with this personality often seek out ways to portray themselves in their perspective. It is believed social media has created a large outlet for these individuals to display inaccurate representations of themselves in order to fulfill their self-image (Leung, 2013).

### **Positive Outcomes**

While researchers often look to understand the negative effects of SNS, several other studies have also highlighted the positive effects of social media (Coyne et al., 2020; Yuen, 2020). It is therefore important to consider these as well in order to provide a complete view of the possible outcomes.

### ***Gratifications***

The self-determination theory says that individuals have psychological needs that when they are met result in positive mental well-being (Yuen, 2020). Individuals' motivations are fueled by three main needs: connectedness, autonomy, and competence. The theory suggests that these psychological needs are behind most of our decisions. The internet, especially SNS, allows many individuals to meet these needs in new, accessible ways. Many researchers look to this theory as the motivator behind the use of SNS (Yuen, 2020).

Coyne et al. (2020) presented the uses and gratification theory as a way to explain why groups of individuals seek the internet. It is often explained by meeting a certain psychological or social need through different means. In terms of internet usage, most studies have found a broad range of gratifications sought by participants. Uses and Gratification theory may be a reason why mental health has a positive correlation with social media in some studies (Coyne et al., 2020). Social media provides a place for individuals to meet psychological needs in ways they are not able to in everyday life.

### **Conflicting Results**

As mentioned before, many studies examining social media effects on individuals have found many conflicting results. Mitev et al. (2021), Gaethe (2020), and Coyne et al. (2020) were among researchers who found results with no clear associations between social media effects and motivations. Mitev and colleagues (2021) found no significant difference in well-being and the different usage levels, no significant difference in within-group bonding, and significant differences in between-group bonding. In Gaethe's (2020) study, those aged 18-24 showed a decrease in self-esteem with an increase in social media, while those who were 45-54 saw the exact opposite occur. He also found that all variables (age, gender, social media type, and social

comparison) predicted self-esteem levels, with time spent on social media having the most significant predictor of self-esteem (Gaethe, 2020). Coyne and colleagues (2020) yielded results that showed depression and anxiety symptoms increased across adolescence, peaked around age 18, and slowly fell in the following years. It was hard to determine if this was due to increased social media usage or puberty, and so they concluded that there was no clear correlation between social media use and increased mental health issues among adolescents (Coyne et al., 2020). These unclear results leave several open questions about the impact of SNS on the mental health and well-being of users.

### **Generational Differences on Social Media**

In addition to studying the impacts of SNS in general, generational differences have been of interest to researchers. Researchers have begun to examine the rate of SNS use, motives behind usage, and feelings towards the internet in general

Studies in this realm often examine the relationship between social media usage and generations. The population is split between those who were introduced to technology as adults (born before 1990) - digital immigrants - and those who were born into the digital age (after 1990) - digital natives. These groups have distinct differences as they grew up with different societal standards and norms. Evaluating how these differences shape their social media use and the effects of social media on these groups is of large interest to researchers (Mayer et al., 2020).

There are many similarities between digital natives and immigrants in recent years, compared to the gap that was originally discovered in earlier studies (Asbury, 2016). This has been cited as resulting from advancing technology as well as technology becoming more and more accessible to members of all socioeconomic statuses (SES). Potential generational divides in the past often varied across economical divides. Some individuals from lower SES may have

grown up in the digital age, but appear similar to digital immigrants in terms of their knowledge and experience due to their lack of access to technology. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) explains the different usage of computers across the two groups based on several factors: perceived usefulness, perceived complexity, user attitude, and user intention. TAM has been used to explain the differences in the past as researchers found a more negative view of technology from older generations (Asbury, 2016).

### Digital Natives

Digital natives are highly adaptive to technological changes and advancements and are often seen as egocentric. These individuals only know life with electronics, and often are very adept at technology usage. They are also found to have lower internet anxiety and more positive attitudes towards the internet (Joiner et al., 2013; Mayer et al., 2020). About half of adolescents use social media daily for an average of one hour (Coyne et al., 2020). They also have been found to have distinctive motives and variables behind their internet use. Digital natives are most interested in using SNS for entertainment and content creation. This generation frequently uses forums to gain friends, share experiences, and discuss their hobbies (Leung, 2013). They are also likely to use the internet for communication and to search for information (Asbury, 2016; Joiner et al., 2013; Mayer et al., 2020). This age group has many issues with privacy and security online (Asbury, 2016). When discussing their internet usage with interviewers, it was noted that digital natives emphasized organization, societal changes, the pressure of social media, and the idea of self-relatedness (Mayer et al., 2020). Those born after 1990 grew up in a very new world, one with an emphasis on the internet, technology, and SNS. These advancements have shaped a large portion of their lives.

### Digital Immigrants

Digital immigrants are a large group, spanning a couple of generations. Those born before 1990 never had access to technology when they were growing up at the level that youth do today. The internet and SNS quickly grew, allowing little time for adjustments by these individuals. Digital immigrants are of interest in this field to determine if they present their own set of SNS effects.

In line with TAM, it was found that those who are older (60-91) own fewer digital devices, express less interest in technology, and are more frustrated with technology than those who are younger (Asbury, 2016). They also use the internet for email and searching for health information. Digital immigrants see social media as a way to stay connected and create an outlet (Asbury, 2016). This group was originally found to regard the internet as confusing, yet recent studies show this generation has grown to enjoy the internet and social media. Digital immigrants often seek out SNS for social gratifications and to vent frustrations (Leung, 2013).

#### Similarities Between Digital Immigrants and Natives

In recent years, many studies have begun to find more similarities between the generations. For example, each generation prefers SNS set up like forums (Leung, 2013). Several studies have found that digital natives use technology and SNS at higher rates (Asbury, 2016; Coyne et al., 2020). However, over the past few years, studies have seen this gap in use begin to close rapidly. It is predicted that as the research advances in the next several years, it will be hard to discern these groups based on the rate of usage alone (Asbury, 2016).

#### **Questions for the Current Study**

The literature pertaining to social media effects on different social media effects is in general very mixed. SNS has weak links to positive well-being in many studies, (Gaethe, 2020; Mitev et al., 2021) links to negative well-being in others (Coyne et al., 2020), or no correlation at

all in some (Yuen, 2020). The studies that found results often found weak connections or had limitations that made the generalizability of the results limited. This has left a gap in the literature, which this study looks to examine further.

Additionally, while several studies have looked into social media effects on well-being in general, and several others have examined different motives and rates of usage among different generations, no studies to date have considered both constructs together. There is also a lack of studies pertaining to the effects of SNS use on digital immigrants in general. This study will therefore attempt to fill these gaps. Specifically, this study will examine the effect of SNS on social media among both digital immigrants and digital natives, and will compare the two. It will include a large sample from each generation and will ask detailed questions about how each individual uses social media, why they use it, and how it affects them. It will then look closely for similarities and differences between the reasons for and the impacts of SNS use in each generation.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

There were 127 total participants (106 females and 21 males), 74 of which were digital natives and 53 of which were digital immigrants. The average age of the digital immigrants was 45, the average age of digital natives was 21. Participants were recruited through social media posts on Facebook and Instagram, and through e-mail requests.

Participants were separated into those born before 1990 (digital immigrants) and those born in 1990 or later (digital natives). A total of 53 digital immigrants (42 females and 11 males) and 74 digital natives (64 females and 10 males) completed the survey. In terms of employment status, 60 participants were full-time students, 7 were part-time students, 48 had a full-time job,

33 had a part-time job, and 13 were unemployed. Some participants checked more than one option (if applicable) for the employment status question.

### *Procedure*

The study was conducted through an online survey created in Google Forms and composed of 53 questions. The survey was open for just over 2 weeks, and before accessing the survey, participants had to complete an informed consent section. The survey included various questions to help examine SNS use, motives, and generational differences among the participants. Questions included a combination of Likert Scale questions, fill-in-the-blank questions, and short answers. These questions asked individuals about their social media use. Examples include, “On average, I use social media approximately \_\_\_\_ hours a day” and “I spend a healthy amount of time on social media.” Participants were also asked about the ways in which they most frequently use social media (e.g., to connect with family, to connect with friends, for entertainment, for news...) and the information they are most likely to share on social media (e.g., personal photos, political views, daily events, short clips or videos...). They were also asked about the different ways that social media makes them feel. Examples of these questions include, “Choose ONE option below that BEST describes the feeling you get MOST frequently when using social media. Social media makes me feel... (Happy, Connected, Anxious, Valued...)” and “Social media is a positive influence in my life.”

### *Scoring*

In order to compare results between digital immigrants and digital natives, questions were categorized into four main topics. These included questions about self-esteem (e.g., “I feel attractive,” and “I feel insecure” - a total of 8 questions), questions about the impact of social media on their lives (e.g., “Social media allows me to take a break from daily stress,” and

“Social media holds great importance in my life” - a total of 7 questions), questions about mental well-being (e.g., “I am satisfied with life,” and “I feel optimistic about my future” - a total of 8 questions), and questions about motives for social media use (e.g., “I use social media to keep a record of my life,” and “I use social media to stay up to date with politics” - a total of 14 questions). Total scores were calculated for each of these categories and used in the calculation of final results.

## Results

Participants were asked to select the one feeling they get most frequently when using social media. As shown in Figure 1, the most popular answer was entertained, which was selected by 56 (44.8%) of respondents. The other possibilities were connected (32 participants, or 25.6%), insecure (11 participants, or 8.8%), anxious (9 participants, or 7.2%), happy (9 participants, or 7.2%), depressed (5 participants, or 4%), valued (2 participants, or 1.6%), validated (1 participant, or 0.8%), or alone (0 participants).

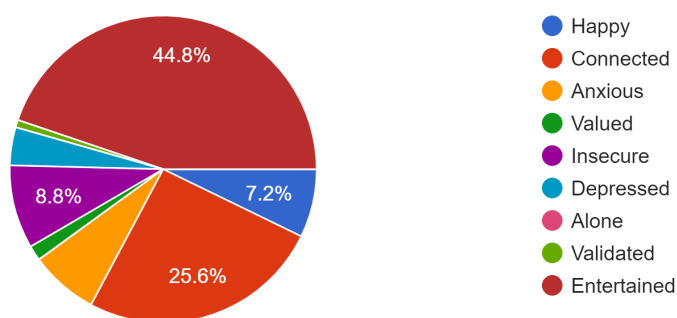


Figure 1

Another question asked was what way they most frequently used social media. Figure 2 shows that the answer most commonly chosen was to connect with friends, which was selected by 56 (44.8%) of respondents. The other possibilities were for entertainment (48 participants, or 38.4%), to connect with family (14 participants, or 11.2%), for news (3 participants, or 2.4%),

for research (2 participants, or 1.6%), to purchase products (1 participant, or 0.8%), to build personal networks (1 participant, or 0.8%), to find jobs (0 participants), or to connect with coworkers (0 participants).

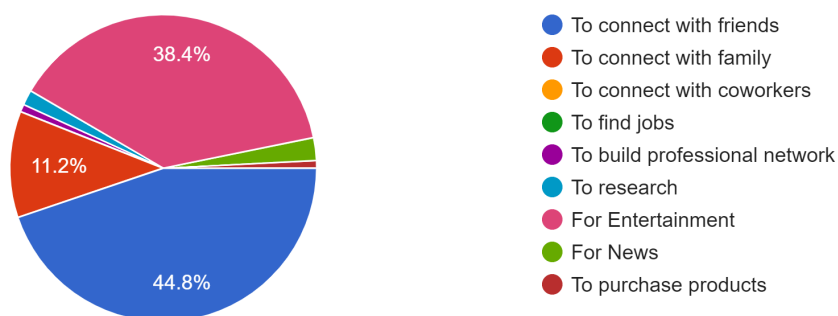


Figure 2

Additionally, participants were asked to indicate the information they most frequently shared on their social media. As depicted in Figure 3, the most common answer was personal photos, which was chosen by 85 (68%) of participants. The other possibilities were memes (18 participants, or 14.4%), political views (6 participants, or 4.8%), career promotions (5 participants, or 4%), daily events (5 participants, or 4%), short clips or videos (4 participants, or 3.2%), and opinion on popular culture (2 participants, or 1.6%).

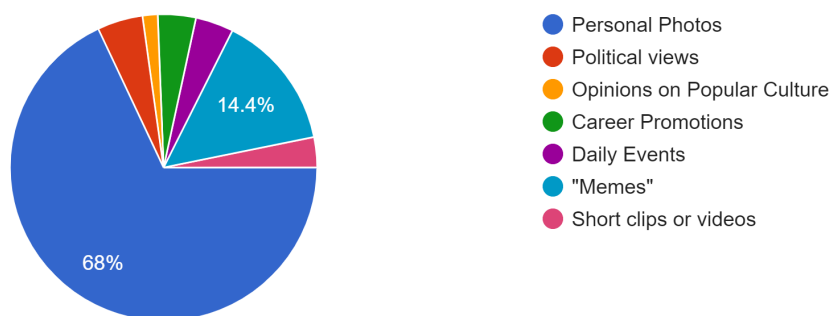


Figure 3

In order to compare digital immigrants and digital natives on the ways in which they used social media as well as on the overall effects that social media has on their lives, a series of

independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted. Several significant differences were found between the groups. For instance, digital immigrants ( $M = 13.28$  years) reported being on social media for significantly more years than did digital natives ( $M = 9.02$  years),  $t(124) = 6.82, p < 0.001$ . On a scale of 1-5 (where 5 indicated strong agreement), digital immigrants ( $M = 3.47$ ) also were more likely to agree that they spend a healthy amount of time on social media than were digital natives ( $M = 3.15$ ),  $t(123) = 1.63, p = 0.12$ .

The average number of hours spent on social media per day was significantly higher among digital natives ( $M = 5.07$  hours) than among digital immigrants ( $M = 2.54$ ),  $t(125) = -4.38, p < 0.001$ . Additionally, digital natives were more likely to agree that they used social media out of habit ( $M = 3.9$ ) than were digital immigrants ( $M = 3.62$ ),  $t(124) = -1.31, p = 0.19$ . On a scale of 1-5, where 5 = very frequently, digital natives also reported posting to social media more frequently ( $M = 3.27$ ) than did digital immigrants ( $M = 2.81$ ),  $t(124) = -2.34, p = 0.02$ .

Digital natives reported that they more frequently shared posts on social media ( $M = 3.27$ ) than digital immigrants ( $M = 2.15$ ),  $t(125) = -5.34, p < 0.001$ . They also more frequently liked other posts ( $M = 4.16$ ) than did digital immigrants ( $M = 3.62$ ),  $t(125) = -3.19, p = 0.002$ . Additionally, they reported more frequently commenting on others' posts ( $M = 3.27$ ) than did digital immigrants ( $M = 2.85$ ),  $t(124) = -1.99, p = 0.049$ .

In terms of the overall effects of social media, digital immigrants and digital natives were compared on total scores across four categories: self-esteem, the impact of social media, mental well-being, and motives for social media use. The differences are depicted in Figure 4. The total self-esteem score for digital immigrants ( $M = 28.89$  out of a possible maximum score of 40) was significantly higher than the total self-esteem score for digital natives ( $M = 27.27$ ),  $t(125) = 1.96, p = 0.05$ . The total impact of social media score for digital natives ( $M = 22.59$  out of a possible

maximum score of 35) was significantly higher than the total impact score for digital immigrants ( $M = 17.87$ ),  $t(125) = -5.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Additionally, the total mental well-being score (range 8-40) was significantly higher in digital immigrants ( $M = 29.55$ ) than in digital natives ( $M = 26.54$ ),  $t(125) = 2.76$ ,  $p = 0.007$ . Finally, the average motives for social media use score (range 14-70) was significantly higher among digital natives ( $M = 45.66$ ) than among digital immigrants ( $M = 39.08$ ),  $t(125) = -4.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Differences Among Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants in Overall Effects of Social Media

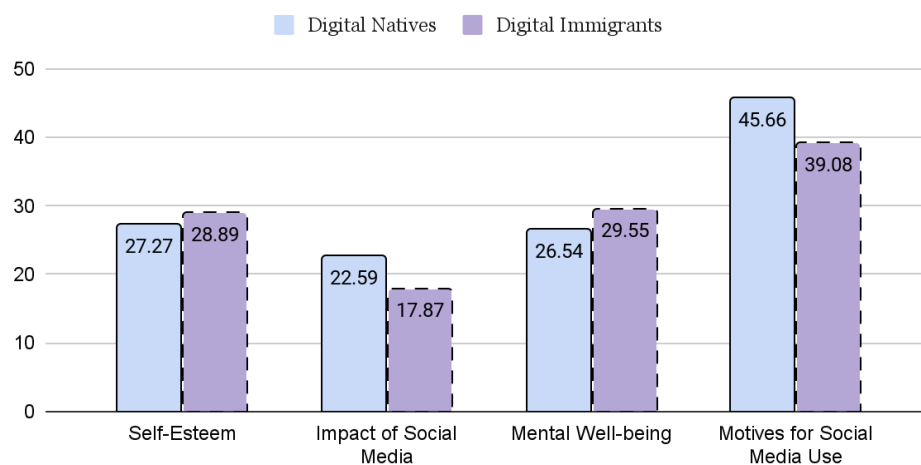


Figure 4

## Discussion

In sum, the results of this study found that digital immigrants have a higher score in mental well-being when compared to digital natives. Digital natives had significantly more time on social media than did digital immigrants, while they also scored lower on mental well-being. This finding aligns with previous research done by Gaethe (2020) and Coyne and colleagues (2020). These researchers found that time on social media often was a predictor of one's mental well-being. They also found that digital natives spent more time on social media and reported negative effects, while immigrants presented the opposite findings.

This study found that digital natives often sought social media mainly for entertainment and to connect with friends, while digital immigrants used social media to connect with family. Both groups shared personal photos the most out of other options. These findings align with the research of Asbury (2016), Joiner and colleagues (2013), Mayer and colleagues (2020), and Perugini and Solani (2021), all of which presented similar results in terms of motives for use among digital natives and digital immigrants.

Previous research, however, for the most part did not look at self-esteem as an outcome, which this study was able to do. The results showed a slowly closing gap between generational differences on social media use as predicted by Asbury (2016). While the results did show a statistically significant difference in the impact of social media use on self-esteem - with the impact being slightly more negative for digital natives - these differences are notably less than earlier research on this topic.

These findings have important implications for social media use. For example, users of social media that fall into the digital native category should be mindful when on social media. Many digital native participants noted that social media made them feel insecure, and overall they rated lower on self-esteem. Digital natives may find that they would benefit from reducing their time on social media and disconnecting their self view from their online image. Parents should restrict their child's time on social media when applicable and support a positive environment for their child's mental well-being and self-esteem. Overall, this study supports the idea that many younger generations are experiencing a negative impact due to social media. It is important for society as a whole to recognize this and work to find ways to support those who experience the negative effects.

However, it is also important to take note of the limitations of the current study. The current study included a larger sample of digital natives than digital immigrants. This may have potentially skewed the findings in some instances. Additionally, the self-report format of the study allows for potential error with participants potentially answering dishonestly. This may be due to the social desirability effect, absentmindedly answering questions, or not completely understanding certain questions. Finally, the survey was shared on social media and by email to those who were known by the researchers. This may have resulted in a pool of participants who are very similar, rather than the desirable diverse sample.

Future research should further explore this topic. While this study looked at the effects of social media on different generations, it is important to understand how to potentially change these effects. Future research should look to conduct studies to try and limit the negative effects of social media on the individuals they study.

Future researchers should also explore whether or not there is an age or developmental stage during which a shift away from the negative impacts of social media occurs. In this study, older participants reported less impacts overall of social media. This could be due to a lower reliance on social media for socialization and communication with peers (since this generation has previous experience socializing in many other ways). However, it could also be that individuals simply “grow out of” the reliance on social media that makes its potential impact so dangerous. If the latter is true, it would be interesting to see when this change occurs and what prompts this change.

Finally, studies that follow this one should examine the effects of specific social networking sites on different generations. The current study asked about “social media sites” in

general, but did not ask participants about the effects of/ their reactions to specific sites. Future work should therefore examine whether the effects of social media use differ for each site.

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