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Social Media Usage: The Impact on Feelings of Depression or Loneliness

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Running Head = Social Media Usage

**Social Media Usage:
The Impact on Feelings of Depression or Loneliness***

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**Social Media Usage:
The Impact on Feelings of Depression or Loneliness**

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, there has been a rapid growth of social media. Much of the problem lies with the new potential for constant social comparisons. Social media also adds a new layer of interaction that can occur anywhere, at any time, with anyone. This allows for a higher quantity of relationships, but strips the depth of these relationships. Does increased social media use affect quality of life? I hypothesize that the more social media sites a respondent is a member or regular user of, the more time he or she reports feeling depressed or lonely. I used a sample of 628 respondents as part of in-person interviews conducted by the 2016 General Social Survey. The results found that overall about 51 percent of the people claimed to feel depressed or lonely none of the time. Meaning that about half of respondents do feel depressed or lonely at least some of the time. The most statistically significant finding revealed that the higher ones income, the less one reports feeling depressed or lonely. However, the hypothesis must be rejected because there is no statistical significance between social media usage and quality of life. Social media site usage does not result in increased feelings of depression or loneliness. Based on the income results, does money buy happiness? Those of lower socio-economic class may not have access to proper medical care and therefore do not get adequate treatment for mental illnesses. Structural forces might be having a direct impact.

Social Media Usage:

The Impact on Feelings of Depression or Loneliness

Over the past decade, there has been a rapid growth of social media. Media has taken on many new forms, the most prominent being the ability to communicate and share with others anywhere in the world in real time. The problem lies with the potential for constant social comparisons. Social media platforms allow for people to show off only bits and pieces of their life - usually curating an idealized version of one's self and daily life.

Society has a way of making people feel inferior to those being represented in the media. Constant questions of "am I good enough?" or thoughts of not being beautiful enough seem as though they are becoming more prominent as media grows. With this new age of social media, people feel as if they have to constantly look their best, and put up a front that makes it seem like they live a perfect life. The way one portrays themselves on social media is not always true to who they are. The concept of "FOMO" also comes into play in this context. "FOMO" is the phrase used in pop culture to mean "fear of missing out". This is a new term that speaks to the influx of social media. Now that people are able to see what their friends are doing in real time, there is a greater potential for feelings of exclusion or thinking one's life does not live up to the excitement of one of their peers. Individuals are able to be in the comfort of their own home, while still interacting and conversing with others. People typically share a multitude of photos of their travels, daily lives, and time spent with friends. These photos are rarely of "boring"

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moments; people want to capture the most memorable and fulfilling experiences in their life. This means we are forced to only see the best moments in our peer's lives. It is not hard to imagine that seeing all of these constant connections and pictures shared would make anyone feel lonely in the moment that they are simply looking at their phone. If an individual is looking at their phone, it typically means they are not engaged in profound conversation, so for that split second they may feel as if their life does not live up to its potential.

Depression and unhappiness rates have increased in recent decades, and it brings into question if social media is a direct link to this. A 2017 study claims "subjective well-being is generally considered to be an important, if not the most important, goal that individuals seek throughout their lives" (Verduyn et al. 2017: 278). Taking this into account, it is important to understand what makes us, as people, feel happy and fulfilled, and what decreases those positive feelings and inversely increases more negative feelings. If one can pinpoint what makes people feel unfulfilled in life, hopefully society can move in a direction to fix this issue. Does increased social media use affect quality of life and overall life satisfaction? It can be assumed that the more social media accounts a respondent has, the more exposed that person is to social media. Therefore, I hypothesize that the more social media sites the respondent is a member or regular user of, the more time he or she reports feeling depressed or lonely.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of literature in the field of sociology and media highlights the weight people put on social capital and outlines what influences life satisfaction. Social capital is the way we, as humans, understand and maneuver networks and communities of

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people. Ideally, an individual is able to look toward a network of people to find trust, companionship, and basic daily interaction. The introduction of social media provides a platform in which social capital can grow on the basis of accessibility to increasing quantities of interactions. Communication is constantly possible through the use of social media. This promotes the growth of one's own social network of friends and peers. However, does this rapid growth of networking produce competition that results in depression, or even cultivate more, yet weaker relationships? Past literature explores these ideas and tries to understand how various aspects of the Internet are connected to life satisfaction and perceived quality of life.

Costs and Benefits of Social Media Use

In recent years, social media usage has immensely increased. The Internet became accessible to the public nearly 30 years ago, and social media in particular was introduced some 20 years ago. However, the regular usage of social networking sites has seen an intense spike over the past decade and seems to be headed in an upward trajectory. Verduyn et al. highlights statistics found by the Pew Internet and American Life Project that found that as of 2015, 65 percent of all Americans use social network sites. Further, "90% of people between the ages of 18 and 29 currently use social network sites" (Verduyn et al. 2017: 277). The findings illustrate the rapid influx of social networking that has taken place specifically among younger adults.

This increase in Internet usage comes with costs and benefits. Franzen (2000: 427) argues that "the internet is an extremely useful communication tool. It enhances the worldwide exchange of information, products, and services". While the Internet has opened up opportunities for communication that otherwise did not exist previously, it

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also provides a shield for individuals to avoid face-to-face interaction, and only rely on social media sites as a form of interaction. Franzen also takes note of the importance of real life, in person, social networks. “Real life” social networks provide benefits for individuals in terms of mental health, career opportunities, social support, and community involvement (Franzen 2000: 427). If in person interaction benefits all of these factors, will the lack of social interaction hurt these factors? These are all things that can arguably affect one’s quality of life, so it can be assumed that by taking them away one’s quality of life would decrease. Chan supports this argument by claiming the negative impacts of mobile phone use as a result of the ability to access the Internet anywhere at any time. Chan explains that “they are particularly useful for sustaining weak ties because they help reduce the time and monetary cost of maintaining relationships with a relatively large number of acquaintances” (Chan 2015: 100). Social media does not influence maintaining strong ties among individuals. Social media sites allow for the ability to connect with a wide range of people, but these relationships mostly remain on the surface level. Parigi and Henson highlight the term “alone together” to demonstrate that technology hinders depth of relationships in return for increased connectivity. The researches further explain that people “easily find company but are exhausted by the pressures of performance” (Parigi and Hensen 2014:161). In a world that should value quality over quantity, social media sites influence and perpetuate the mindset of quantity over quality.

A spike in mobile phone and social media usage also leads to the question of whether humans are becoming more socially isolated. Hampton, Sessions, and Her (2011) conducted a study to find out how many people report that they have individuals

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in their life with whom they discuss important matters. They conducted telephone interviews with 2,162 people and compared the results of a z-test with findings from the 1985 GSS that studied the same question. The results showed that the number of people who reported no confidants in 2008 is statistically higher than was reported in the 1985 GSS. More specifically, Hampton et al. (2010) explain that a substantive change is represented by a 50 percent increase in social isolation over two decades (Hampton et al. 2010: 140). There are many reasons to propose why there seems to be an increase in social isolation. The Hampton et al. study suggests that the introduction of internet and mobile phones blurs the lines of how people categorize “discussion” with confidants. These technologies undermine what is considered “discussion”, which may hinder the social and psychological benefits that come from those interactions.

Role of the Media

Responding to Mark Deuze’s article, *Media Life*, Kubitschko and Knapp (2012) support the idea that an increased number of people around the world are living a media-saturated life. The media itself has become “an essential part of the infrastructure of modern life” (Kubitschko and Knapp 2012: 359). Deuze discusses the media life perspective and claims that some may argue it confirms “the issue that our lived reality cannot be experiences separate from, or outside of media” (Deuze 2011: 140). The media has become one of the biggest parts of people’s lives, often acting as an invisible presence because some do not acknowledge or realize how often they are engaging with it. The access to digital technologies has changed the nature of human interaction, and even changed the way humans think (Pitts 2011:241).

Social Capital

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A counter argument to all of this, however, is that the Internet allows for a new type of communication that extends beyond the capabilities of face-to-face interaction. Lee et al. (2010) propose that the internet “allows people to communicate with family members, friends, coworkers, and strangers in distant places, across cultures and without time constraints; it can help to strengthen people’s social relationships and form new relationships” (Lee et al. 2010: 376). This ability grants the opportunity to maintain contact with important people in an individual's life that one would otherwise not be able to connect with. Quinn explains that the Internet is linked to “increases in individuals’ social network diversity, which likely increases access to social capital at the individual level” (Quinn 2016: 584). Social capital has the potential to increase based on the fact that the Internet allows us to widen our network to areas and people we may otherwise not encounter. Diversifying our network increases social capital. Through social media networks, we are able to “like” people’s posts, seek out or share information with others, and even directly communicate if we so choose. These are all factors that add to social capital. Bohn et al. however, argue that this flood of Internet use might “reduce the effort to build and use social capital” (Bohn et al. 2013: 29). If the ability to connect with others is now right at our fingertips, people could stop putting in any effort to maintain relationships. It is as if social media gives people a false sense of security that they have a core network of relationships. These sites also bring in the potential for competition. Look at Facebook, for example. The number of friends an individual has is clearly shown on one’s profile for anyone to see. Yet, those numbers do not really mean anything if those people do not hold strong ties in real life situations. It is all just numbers, but it seems that numbers of “followers” and “friends” someone has is an indicator of social

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capital. Typically, the more “friends” someone has, the more “likes” or comments on a post they will get, which boosts the immediate sense of confidence and validation. This allows for short term gratification, but does not necessarily better one’s life in the long term. Is it possible for people to gain “virtual social capital” (Lee et al. 2010: 376), and would it differ from our already existing notion of social capital? We cannot, however, mistake social capital for a synonym for well-being. It is widely understood that when people live a more socially involved life they are happier and healthier, but it does not mean the two are interchangeable.

To further explore the idea of “virtual social capital”, Lee et al. studied a sample of 1,436 individuals ranging from 10 to 55+ years old from four Chinese cities to understand the difference between the use of internet for interpersonal communication versus face-to-face communication. More specifically, they wanted to figure out if the use of the Internet for interpersonal communication could replace face-to-face communication in improving quality of life. The results revealed that their original hypothesis was not supported, and Internet communication cannot replace face-to-face communication. Their driving argument behind this outcome has to do with the “scarcity of strong ties in internet communication” (Lee et al. 2010: 383). It has come up in multiple citations that as humans we thrive off of relationships, and the Internet does not allow for the type of substantial ties among individuals that are so crucial. It is not to say that relationships cannot be formed and cultivated through social media outlets, but these relationships cannot gain the depth to which individuals need.

A recent study conducted by Weixu Lu and Keith N Hampton in 2017 tries to understand how individuals perceive social support as it relates to social media. They

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found that there is, in fact, a positive relationship between general Internet use and perceived social support. They specifically looked to Facebook to understand social media as a narrower category from overall Internet use. They found that more frequent status updates is positively correlated with all forms of perceived social support, except for tangible support (Lu and Hampton 2017: 870).

The Role of Gender, Income, and Age

In order to understand the role that social media usage plays in one's mental well-being, other factors must be accounted for. Inglehart (2002) looks into the relationship between gender, aging, and subjective well-being. Inglehart explains that contrary to what people tend to think, a number of surveys have repeatedly revealed that men and women affirm similar happiness levels, despite the fact that "men have higher incomes, more prestigious jobs, and more authority of women" (Inglehart 2002: 391). Based on a sample of 70,192 men and 76,079 women pulled from 122 World Value Surveys from 1981-1997, Inglehart found that 23 percent of men and 24 percent of women claimed to be "very happy", which is barely a difference, if any. However, Inglehart did find variance within the sample when adding age as a factor. Women seemed to describe themselves as overall happier, but around the age of 45 it switched, and an upward shift of men reporting somewhat higher levels of happiness was found. Reflecting on this study, the researcher explained that there has been a recent women's movement seen globally that has been forcefully advocating for gender equality. These efforts have shown an increase in the improved status of women, which can be assumed to raise their subjective happiness levels. Although there is not a strong variance between men and women, it is understood that women rate themselves as slightly happier than men overall

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- especially before the age of 45. Kristina Waters, Shannon Bambery, and Roger Clark wanted to follow up on Inglehart's findings by replicating the study using data ranging from 1972 to 2014 of the General Social Survey. They found similar results that revealed that on average women report to be about 6 percent happier than men between the ages of 18 to 27. However, between the ages of 68 to 77 men are about 7 percent more likely to report higher levels of happiness (Walters, Bambery, and Clark 2016: 86).

Aside from gender, it is important to note how income can affect life satisfaction. Martin Schroder studied how income inequality influences life satisfaction in Germany. An important take away from this study was the added factor of media attention to inequality. He found that "while people seem to adapt to long-run levels of inequality, they do not seem to adapt to long-run levels of media attention to inequality" (Schroder 2015: 318). The way the media draws attention to how income inequality affects how individuals view their own life. This demonstrates the strong influence media outlets hold on society, and how easily people are convinced of ways in which their life could be better.

Quality of Life

In order to fully grasp a potential connection of loneliness to social media usage, other influences and results of loneliness need to be understood first. Loneliness is often more prominent in individuals who avoid in person social interaction. A lot of the time this is because said individuals view interpersonal contact as anxiety inducing. Canary and Spitzberg (1993) remind us that lonely people frequently "turn to the media for informational and entertainment needs that are not met in interpersonal contexts" (Canary

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and Spitzberg 1993:801). This brings up the chicken or the egg phenomenon. Which comes first - media usage or feelings of loneliness?

Looking more broadly at life satisfaction, Senol-Durak and Durak studied the relationship between life satisfaction, self-esteem and the symptoms of problematic Internet use. They found that individuals with low levels of life satisfaction as well as individuals with higher levels of self-esteem problems shared higher scores of problematic Internet use. Their rationale behind these findings was that these individuals with lower life satisfaction and higher self esteem problems “may use the Internet as a way of escaping self-esteem problems” (Durak and Durak 2010: 29). This expresses a reverse causal reaction. The individuals who are arguably less happy end up spending more time online, than those that are happier. It is not the level of Internet use that causes the unhappiness, but the unhappiness leads to the excessive time spent on the Internet. Nie, Sousa-Poza, and Nimrod (2015) found a similar result in the Chinese population, saying that the longer time exposed to the Internet is linked with a decrease in happiness. They also found, however, that age plays a definite role in the relationship between Internet use and happiness. Similar to Durak and Durak, Morahan-Martin claims that an issue with this subject matter is explaining causality. Martin concludes that the relationship between “disturbed use of the Internet and other pathologies such as depression, loneliness, and social anxiety suggest that Internet abuse may be symptomatic of other disorders for some” (Martin 2005: 45). Martin was looking into Internet abuse and whether it can be categorized as a distinct disorder, and found that it couldn't. Yet what stood out was the fact that other types of disorders could be what leads people to rely on the internet. Martin also argued that what needs to be studied is the type of

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Internet activities that are being used. The Internet as a whole is too broad and in order to further understand why people turn to internet abuse, researchers need to understand the specific activated that people pursue online (Martin 2005: 45).

The literature highlights the implications of general Internet use and presents arguments for both benefits, like increased potential for communication, and costs, such as the potential for internet abuse or promoting the avoidance of in person interaction. The research also presents the concept that those whom already report negative emotions, such as loneliness, gravitate toward increased Internet use. Rather than Internet use in general, which could refer to a multitude of things ranging from gaming to Youtube videos, social media as a more specific type of Internet use showcases the ways interaction online affects the individual, which is what this study plans to explore.

THEORY

An overarching theory that grounds and helps to explain much of the research discussed by previous studies is the theory of symbolic interaction. Symbolic interaction is the driving force behind the social world. Meaning is created by the interaction between individuals, and that meaning becomes reality. Based on this theory, as humans we are the product of social forces and every interaction we encounter shapes who we are and who we become. Social media has added an entirely new perspective to this approach because now these interactions can take place through technology. Ganesini and Brighi highlight this concept by explaining the idea that people are “increasingly interacting and living in an online environment characterized by eyes-hands-fingers communication that has dramatically changed peer relationships, expectations, and behaviors” (Ganesini and Brighi 2015: 3). Face-to-face interaction is no longer the only situation in which meaning

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is formed; it can be created through text interactions alone. This new medium also blurs the lines of interaction because now one can be in the know of what is going on in their peer's life without interacting with them at all. It is a one sided type of interaction that can easily produce feelings of exclusion, inferiority, or any range of emotional reactions. In the digital world, relationships influence and are influenced by the behaviors and interactions of others we witness online (Gianesini and Birghi 2015: 32). This one sided interaction makes the pure awareness of events and experiences in others lives now possible, yet it would make sense that this form of interaction would leave people feeling loney.

METHODS

To conduct my research I used data collected from the 2016 General Social Survey. The population targeted by the General Social Survey is adults (18+) living in households in the United States, restricted to either English or Spanish speaking. Most of the interviews conducted by the GSS are in person interviews, but over the phone interviews are used if necessary. The unit of analysis is individuals. The sample I will be using includes 1,372 people from Ballot B of the 2016 survey. After taking out the missing data from the sample, the sample size is cut to 628 respondents that got asked all of the questions in this study. For further information on how the data were collected, see <http://gss.norc.org/>.

I am studying the use of social media and how it relates to quality of life. My independent variable is the number of social media sites an individual is a member of. The GSS asks, "Which of the following social networking or social media sites are you a member or regular user of?" The survey then goes through the following list of social

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media sites: twitter, facebook, instagram, linkedin, snapchat, tumblr, whatsapp, googlesn, pinterest, flickr, and vine. Respondents either answer yes or no to each site, which is coded are each represented as separate variables. I am choosing to focus on facebook, instagram, snapchat, twitter, and linkedin because I believe those sites involve the most peer-to-peer interaction, and are currently the most popular. In order to understand the data as one variable, I dummied each variable so that “no” will be represented as “0”, and “yes” will be represented as “1”. Then I created an index of all the answers in order to interpret the results in terms of which respondents are regular users of the higher number of social media sites. The index will be based on a scale from 0 to 5, representing the number of sites used.

My dependent variable is feelings of depression or loneliness. The GSS asks, “Please tell me how much of the time during the past week... (1) you felt depressed? (2) You felt lonely?” The possible answers are as follows: None or almost none of the time, some of the time, most of the time, all or almost all of the time. I recoded the variables so that the responses are coded as “1” representing “non or almost none of the time” in a sequential order up to “4” representing “all or almost all of the time”. I then created an index so that I can analyze both variables together as one dependent variable. The index will show a scale from 2 to 8, in which the higher the number, the more depressed or lonely the respondent feels. I controlled for age, sex, and income, as I believe that these are all factors that typically can affect one’s perceived quality of life. The sex variable is also dummied so that “female” is represented as “1” and “male” is represented as “0”. I’m using the “income16” variable to control for income, which is representative of the respondent’s total family income from the fall of 2015 before taxes.

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FINDINGS

Univariate Analysis

Figure 1 shows the number of social media sites respondents are a regular user of. About 30 percent of people only use one site, followed by about 26 percent that are regular users of two sites. The mean for the usage index is 1.75, with two thirds of respondents falling between 0.45 and 3.05. Figure 2 shows self-reported feelings of depression and loneliness. About 51 percent of people claimed to feel depressed or lonely none of the time. Meaning that about half of respondents do feel depressed or lonely at least some of the time. Table 1 indicates that the mean for the quality of life index is 2.81, with two thirds falling between 1.74 and 3.88. Additionally, table 1 shows that the mean age of respondents is 45, with a standard deviation of about 15. Therefore, two thirds of respondents are between ages 30 and 60. A little over half, fifty five percent, of the sample are women, and the mean income is 2.9, translating to around 49,000 dollars.

Table 1. Means, Median, and Standard Deviations (N=628)

Variable	Mean	Median	SD
Usage Index	1.75	2.00	1.300
Quality of Life Index	2.81	2.00	1.070
Women	0.55	1.00	0.497
Income	2.92	3.00	1.435
Age	45.46	44.00	15.780

Bivariate Analysis

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Table 2 depicts the correlations between social media usage, quality of life, and the control variables: sex, income, and age. There is a positive but weak relationship between quality of life and sex, age and sex, and age and income. There is a negative but weak relationship between income and quality of life and income and sex. Finally, there is a negative and moderate relationship between age and social media usage. There was no statistically significant relationship between social media usage and quality of life, sex or income, or quality of life and age.

Table 2. Correlation among Quality of Life and Three Independent Variables ($n=628$)

	Social Media Usage	Women	Age	Income
Quality of Life	.018	.080*	-.048	-.236**
Social Media Usage		.006	-.365**	.033
Women			.097	-.089
Age				.152**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Multivariate Analysis

The multivariate regression table (see table 3) reveals an R squared of .073, meaning that 7.3 percent of the variance in feelings of depression or loneliness is explained by social media usage, income, gender, and age. Table 3 also reveals an F of about 12, which means the regression equation is significant. The results show that income has the only effect on feelings of depression or loneliness, with a standardized coefficient of -.259. Focusing on the unstandardized coefficients, income is significant at the .01 level with a value of -.049. Social media usage and sex are not significant at this

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level. Looking at the effect of the independent variable, for every unit increase in social media usage, there is a .026 increase in feelings of depression or loneliness. Yet, this result is not statistically significant and therefore no conclusions can be drawn from this finding. It is important to note that sex was significant at the bivariate level, but is no longer significant at the multivariate level once the other variables have been controlled for. The hypothesis is rejected because there is no evidence that supports the claim that the more social media sites a respondent is a regular user of, the more frequent one feels depressed or lonely.

Table 3. Regression of Feelings of Depression or Loneliness on All Variables

Variable	<i>b</i>	β
Social Media Usage	.026	.031
Income	-.049**	-.259
Women	.117	.054
Age	7.709E-5	.003
Constant	3.586	

$R^2 = .073$; $F(4,623) = 12.2777$; $p < .01$
** $p < .01$

DISCUSSION

The correlation matrix is significant at the .05 and .01 level, whereas the regression is significant only at the .01 level. As a result of this, the sex variable is only significant at the .05 level, which is why this significance is lost with the multivariate analysis. The results that are statistically stronger than the rest are the relationship between income and quality of life, and the relationship between social media usage and age. The negative weak relationship between income and quality of life means that, on

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average, the higher ones income, the less one reports feeling depressed or lonely. So, *does* money buy happiness? This is an interesting finding that could suggest other factors are influencing this result. Those of lower socio-economic class may not have access to proper medical care and therefore do not get adequate treatment for mental illnesses. For example, someone with a higher income would have the resources to see therapists and psychiatrists to combat these feelings of depression and possibly receive prescriptions to help suppress these negative emotions. These structural forces might be having a direct impact on quality of life due to access to medical care. The negative and moderate relationship between age and social media usage expressed in the bivariate results (Table 2) means that the older the respondent, the less social media sites they are a regular user of. This makes sense from a cultural standing because social media sites are very new and therefore, were not around for most of older adults lives. This is a trend and tool that is commonly used more often among the younger generations. The bivariate results indicate that the hypothesis is disconfirmed, and there is no statistical significance between social media usage and quality of life. Meaning that social media site usage does not result in increased feelings of depression or loneliness. The regression results (Table 3) express that about seven percent of the variance in feelings of depression or loneliness are explained by the combination of social media usage, income, age, and sex. This being said, that leaves about 83 percent of the reasoning behind these negative emotions unexplained by the findings. There must be another variable, or set of variables, that is causing about half of respondents to report feeling depressed or lonely at least some of the time.

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Internet use in general produces a higher quantity of interactions, which leads to the potential for more relationships to be formed. In the case of social media specifically, this should be particularly true because the intention of social media sites is to provide a platform for people to talk and share with one another. If the hypothesis were correct then we should see that these increased relationships promote feelings of depression or loneliness, but this is not the case. The findings explain that these negative emotions are not formed as a result of social media use. This suggests that despite the change in the type of interaction taking place, the theory of symbolic interaction remains relevant. Meaning is brought about at the individual level by interactions. Even though these interactions are not in person, they still hold weight and at least maintain the illusion that one is not lonely. Social media allows for the potential for constant communication. Interaction is always available at one's disposal.

CONCLUSION

The rapid growth of social media over the past decade has brought up questions of the positive and negative implications it will bring to society and individuals. The potential for constant social comparisons is commonly understood to be at the root of many of these new problems. Furthermore, social media adds a new layer of interaction that can occur anywhere, at any time, with anyone. This allows for a higher quantity of relationships, but strips the depth of these relationships. Does increased social media use affect quality of life? I hypothesize that the more social media sites a respondent is a member or regular user of, the more time he or she reports feeling depressed or lonely. I used a sample of 628 respondents as part of in-person interviews conducted by the 2016 General Social Survey. The results found that overall about 51 percent of the people

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claimed to feel depressed or lonely none of the time. Meaning that about half of respondents do feel depressed or lonely at least some of the time. The most statistically significant finding revealed that the higher ones income, the less one reports feeling depressed or lonely. According to the multivariate analysis, about seven percent of the variance in feelings of depression or loneliness is explained by social media usage, age, sex, and income. This leaves about eighty three percent of the variance to be the result of other variables that were not explored in the research. The results indicate that the hypothesis is disconfirmed, and there is no statistical significance between social media usage and quality of life. Social media site usage does not result in increased feelings of depression or loneliness.

Literature has found that lonely people tend to use the internet as an outlet in replace of interpersonal connections (Canary and Spitzberg 1993), or a way of escaping self-esteem issues (Durak and Durak 2010). Past research like this explains why general use of the Internet is linked to negative emotions. This relationship between negative emotions and the Internet is based on the fact that people that express these negative feelings lean on the Internet more than those who are emotionally better off. However, does the reverse affect exist? Does increased Internet usage promote negative feelings? The current research being done in my study is important because social media is a branch of the Internet that has been around for less time, and has only gained a profound level of popularity in recent years. This adds a new perspective to research on general Internet use that has not yet been explored thoroughly. When referring to the Internet, as most past research does, it could be referring to online games, forums, video watching, music sites, or anything else the Internet may provide. Social media sites are clearly

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defined by the accessibility to communication and share-ability that exists with others. My research demonstrates that social media fails to show this relationship of Internet use to negative emotions, which the literature claims. Social media allows for individuals to build social capital through the new concept of “virtual social capital” (Lee et al. 2010). Social media sites are intended for individuals to use as a means of communication and interaction. All of these interactions help individuals gain social capital. It can be argued that increased social capital makes people feel as if they have a network of peers that they can trust and gain from. Moreover, symbolic interaction supports the idea that meaning is drawn out of interactions. In this case, positive meaning is created because this type of communication creates a multitude of relationships that add to one’s social capital. Our social world is simply a compilation of relationships with other social beings. Social media provides the easiest way to access other people in seconds. In a sense, humans are never alone anymore, because the world is at their fingertips with the click of a button.

Limitations

It is crucial to acknowledge that this research has limitations that must be taken into account. First, the sample itself contains fewer than one thousand people, which is on the smaller side. Even though the GSS produces a random sample, which is representative, the fewer number of respondents as a result of only a subset of people being asked the mental health questions makes it harder to reach statistical significance. Further, the responses are self-reported feelings. Everyone has different capabilities of emotions and interprets emotions in varying ways. It is harder to make a sound claim on answers that could have differing interpretations of what the respondent means. The possible answer for feelings of depression or loneliness, such as “all of the time” or

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“some of the time” are unclear as to what that exactly means. “Some of the time” can be translated in different ways to different people. Moreover, There is always a debate as to how accurate responses are when they are self-reported. People that often feel depressed or lonely may not want to admit or acknowledge these emotions, and therefore miss represent themselves. Some people may respond with an answer that they want to fit under, even if it may not be the whole truth. Additionally, mental health and mental illness play a big role in this topic. It is highly likely that those people who report feeling depressed or lonely also have a tendency to fall into these emotional states because of mental health issues or instabilities.

Future Research

I would have liked to control for mental illness or something to the same degree, however the 2016 GSS did not contain any questions that were representative of mental health in a compelling or clear way. In order to get a concrete understanding of how these illnesses can influence feelings of depression or loneliness, the clearest way to go about it would be include an interview question stating whether someone has an official diagnosis. Future research needs to account for this possibility and control for diagnosed mental illnesses. This study only controlled for age, sex, and income, but it would be interesting to control for education level and employment status as well. Getting an education and maintaining a job has strong potential to positively influence one's quality of life, and if this study were to be replicated it should control for these things as well. Lastly, focusing on the usage rates for the specific social media sites could provide new insight that cannot be understood through the synthesis of all the sites combined. There may be one particular site that is being used to a significantly higher degree. This might

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also illustrate that one site has a greater impact on feelings of depression or loneliness than the others, based on the type of social media it provides.

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Table 1. Means, Median, and Standard Deviations (N=628)

Variable	Mean	Median	SD
Usage Index	1.75	2.00	1.300
Quality of Life Index	2.81	2.00	1.070
Women	0.55	1.00	0.497
Income	2.92	3.00	1.435
Age	45.46	44.00	15.780

Table 2. Correlation among Quality of Life and Three Independent Variables ($n=628$)

	Social Media Usage	Women	Age	Income
Quality of Life	.018	.080*	-.048	-.236**
Social Media Usage		.006	-.365**	.033
Women			.097	-.089
Age				.152**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3. Regression of Feelings of Depression or Loneliness on All Variables

Variable	b	β
Social Media Usage	.026	.031
Income	-.049**	-.259
Women	.117	.054
Age	7.709E-5	.003
Constant	3.586	

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$R^2 = .073$; $F(4,623) = 12.2777$; $p < .01$
 $**p < .01$

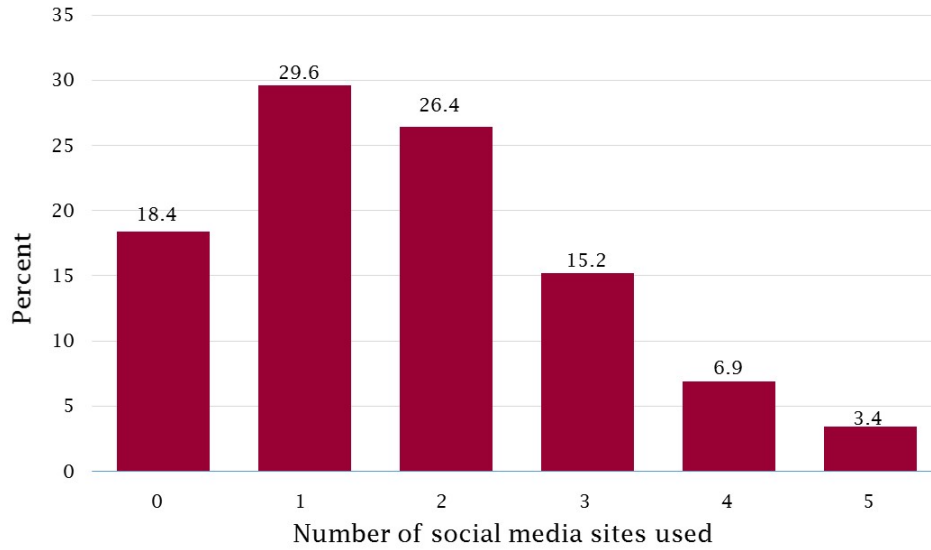


Figure 1. Social Media Site Usage

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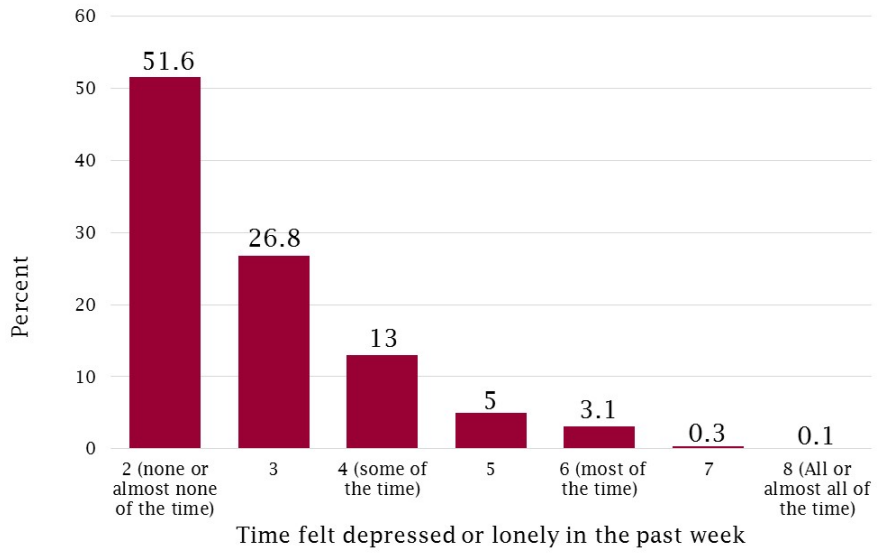


Figure 2. Self Reported Feelings of Depression or Loneliness

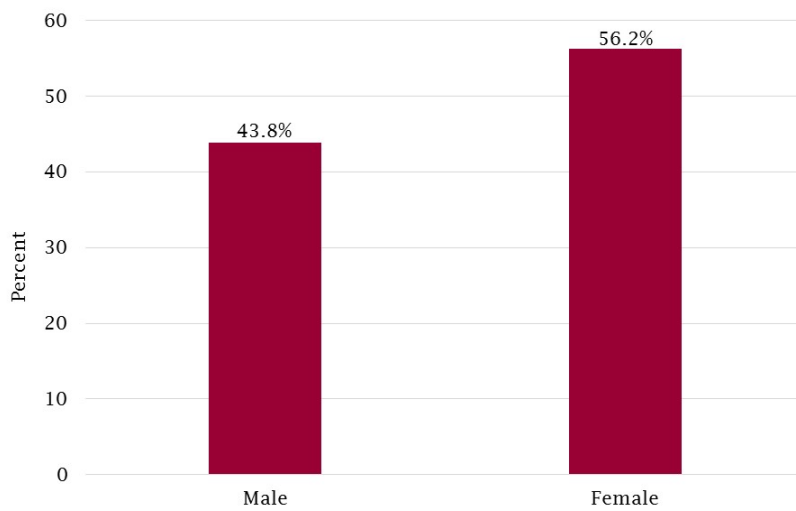


Figure 3. Sex of Respondents

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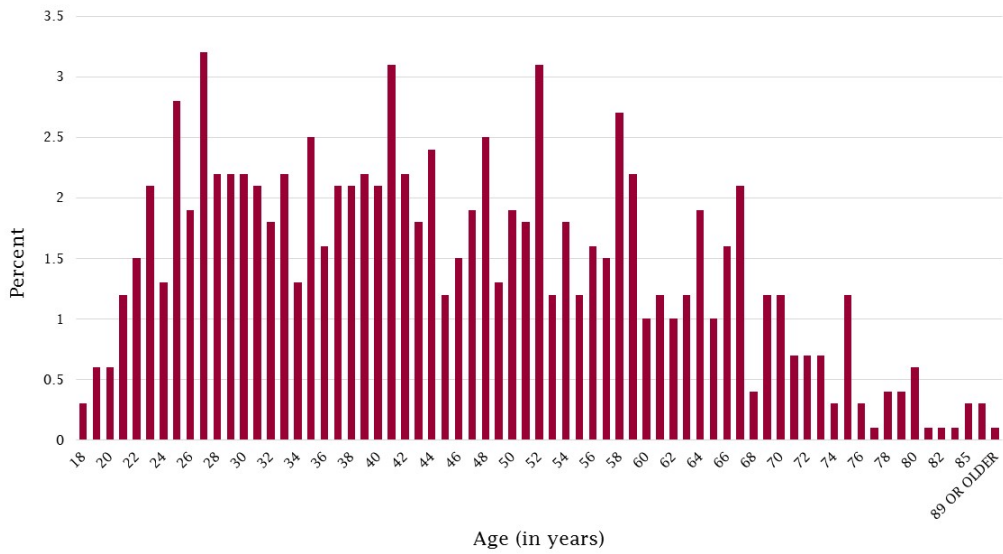


Figure 4. Age of Respondents

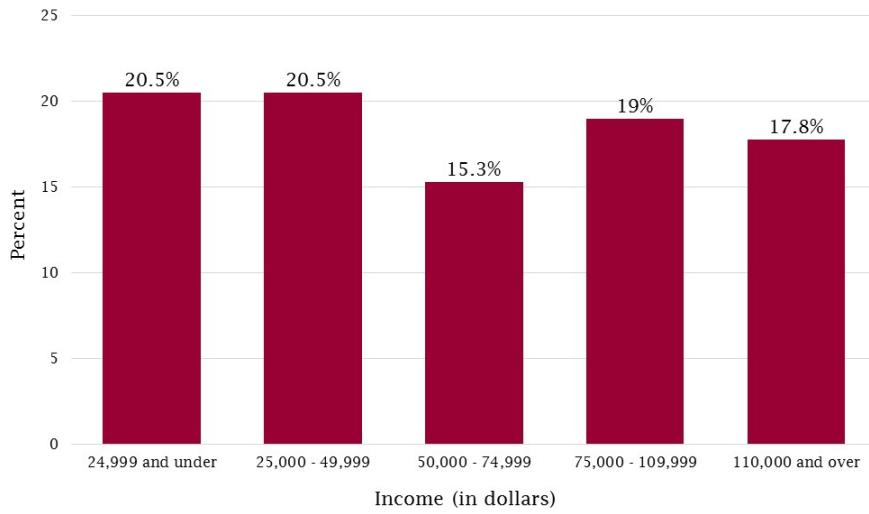


Figure 5. Income of Respondents