

ABSTRACT

The world of technology has evolved and transformed over the last few decades, introducing one of society’s most controversial advancements, social media. Adolescents are among the most prominent users of these platforms, causing researchers to question the impact of social media on their lives. The current study analyzes how social media use among adolescents specifically impacts connectedness and mental health. The cross-sectional study included 1,030 participants across the United States from the ages of 13-17. Individuals were selected using a probability-based sampling method and asked to participate in an online survey, assessing what social media platforms they use, frequency of use, and the impact it has on their relationships and internal emotions. Results displayed that among adolescents, higher frequency of social media use is correlated with higher levels of connectedness and better mental wellbeing. Due to the existing and ongoing controversy over social media, it is critical to understand the effects of these platforms on the youth in America today. By having this knowledge, additional resources can be provided to adolescents and their families on how to appropriately use social media.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study

- With social media use on the rise for adolescents, it can be beneficial for social workers to be aware of this to better connect with clients from this generation. Social workers can assist adolescents in developing healthy use of social media by providing psychoeducation about the potential benefits and consequences of social media use.

Purpose of the Research

- The purpose of the following study is to evaluate and understand the potential effects of social media usage on adolescents.

Research Questions & Hypotheses

- What is the effect of social media on connectedness within personal relationships?
 - Adolescents who spend more time on social media will demonstrate an increase in connectedness within personal relationships.
- What is the effect of social media on mental health among adolescents?
 - Adolescents who spend more time on social media will demonstrate decreased rates of mental well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescence is one of the most vulnerable periods of time within a person’s life. Reports of adolescent’s mental health in recent years demonstrates a continuous decline, particularly during teenage years. About 48 percent of the adolescents resulted in a diagnosis of a mental disorder (Olson et al., 2014). Numerous theories have been proposed to attempt to explain the reason for this increase in the United States. Technology and social media use is among one of the most prevalent theories due to its recent popularity and growth among adolescents. Social media has taken a key interest within the United States due to its controversial possible positive and negative side effects on adolescents. According to Twenge et al. (2018), there is a direct correlation between amount of time spent on screen activities with depression. Although social media has potential negative effects, research also demonstrates the possibility of positive outcomes. Guinta and John (2018) discovered one of the most positive results of social media use is social support networks, another form of connectedness. Social media was found to be a critical component of developing inclusion, especially for those who identify within a minority community and are seeking support.

METHODS

Research Design

- Cross-sectional research design was utilized in conducting the study. The data collected was facilitated at a single point in time.

Sample

- The final dataset was selected using the probability-based sampling method and included 1,030 participants ages 13 to 17 years old.

Independent Variable

- Frequency of social media use: Three questions were used to examine the frequency of social media use. The questions provided to assess social media include, “How often do you do each of the following items?” The three activities provided were “go to a social networking site like Facebook or Myspace”, “send or receive messages on Twitter”, and “send or receive Tumblr messages”. A total sum scale was created from these three variables. The total score ranged from 0 to 9 with the higher score indicating more frequent use of social media.

Dependent Variables

- Connectedness: Five questions were used to portray the impact social media has had on various relationships within the participant’s life. The first three questions demonstrate potential positive contributions of social media use and the two questions assessed possible negative effects of social media use on connectedness. The five variables were combined to create a sum scale of connectedness, with the total score ranging from 5 to 20 with the higher number indicating better connectedness.
- Mental health: Seven questions were used to measure mental health. Participants were asked if using their preferred social media results in them feeling the following ways: confident, better or worse, connected, sympathetic, outgoing, popular, and depressed. Recoded variables were added to create a total scale of mental health, with participants’ scores ranging from -7 to 7, with the higher number indicating better mental well-being.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 1 portrays the demographics of the 1,030 participants.

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N= 1,030)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Male	446	43.3
Female	584	56.7
Age in years	M= 15.27	SD= 1.351
Race/Ethnicity		
White, Non-Hispanic	634	61.6
Black, Non-Hispanic	73	7.1
Other, Non-Hispanic	38	3.7
Hispanic	227	22.0
2+ Races, Non-Hispanic	58	5.6
Number of people in household	M= 4.44	SD= 1.589
Teens in household	M= 1.57	SD= .817
Type of House		
A one-family house detached from any other house	854	82.9
A one-family house attached to one or more houses	45	4.4
A building with 2 or more apartments	96	9.3
A mobile home	34	3.3
Boat, RV, Van, etc.	1	0.1
Marital Status		
Married	84	8.1
Divorced	11	1.1
Separated	3	0.3
Never Married	928	90.1
Living with a Partner	4	0.4
Income		
Less than \$20,000	133	12.9
\$20,000-\$39,999	204	19.8
\$40,000-\$59,999	167	16.2
\$60,000-\$84,999	193	18.7
\$85,000 or more	333	32.3
Region of Residence		
West	236	22.9
Southwest	123	11.9
Midwest	273	26.5
Southeast	211	20.5
Northeast	185	18.0
Other	2	0.2
Home Internet access		
No	47	4.6
Yes	938	95.4

RESULTS

The Spearman’s Rho analysis was tested in order to assess if there is a significant relationship between social media use and connectedness and social media and mental health. Table 2 depicts means, standard deviations, and the intercorrelation between variables.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Social Media, Connectedness, and

Mental Health

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Social Media	3.11	1.91	-----		
2. Connectedness	8.71	2.10	.294**	-----	
3. Mental Health	1.36	2.01	.149**	.438**	-----

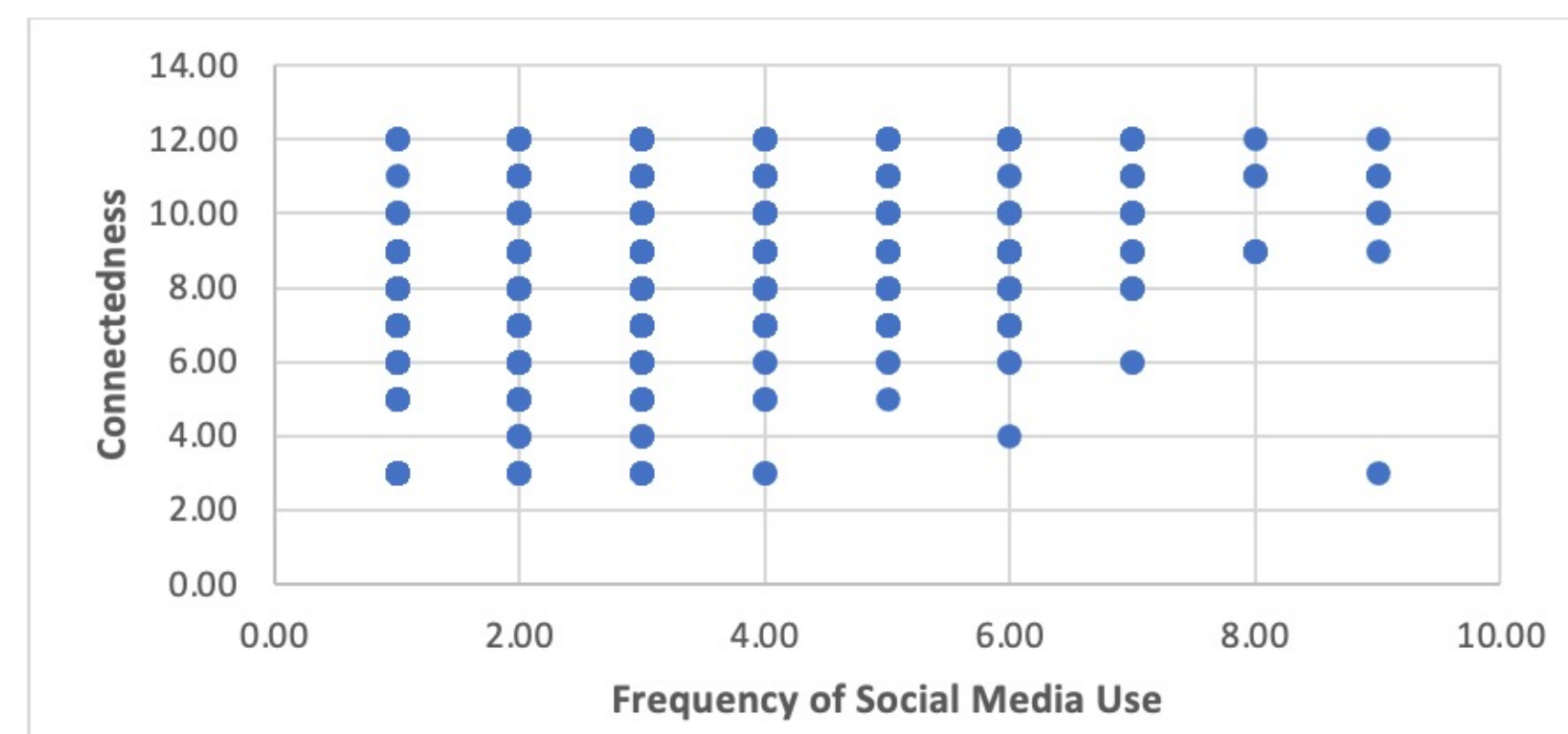
Note. **p<.001

RESULTS: SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONNECTEDNESS

The relationship between social media use and connectedness (n= 805) was examined using a Spearman *rho* correlation analysis. The results indicated a positive statistically significant association between social media use and connectedness, $r_s(803) = .294$, $p<.001$. The strength of the correlation was weak. Higher social media use was related to higher levels of connectedness.

Figure 1

Correlation Between Social Media Use and Connectedness

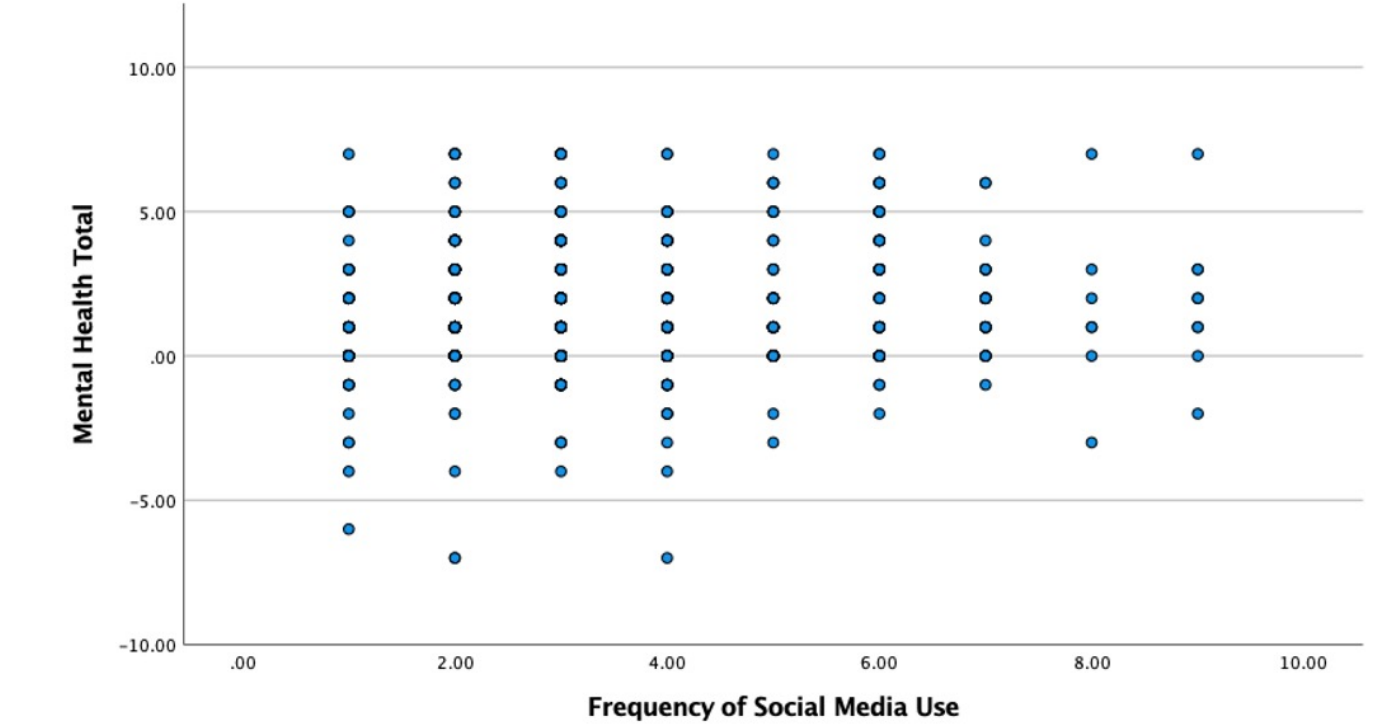


RESULTS: SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH

The relationship between social media use and mental health (n=814) was examined using a Spearman *rho* correlation analysis. The results indicated a positive statistically significant association between social media use and mental health, $r_s(812) = .149$, $p<.001$. The strength of the correlation was weak. Higher social media use was related to better mental well-being.

Figure 2

Correlation Between Social Media Use and Mental Health



DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

- Higher social media use was associated with higher levels of connectedness. This finding agrees with hypothesis one.
- A positive relationship was found between frequency of social media use and total mental health. As a result, hypothesis two was not supported.

Implications for Research and Social Work Practice

- Social workers can have these conversations within their clinics, schools, hospitals, or homes. Creating an environment where adolescents can ask questions and share experiences will promote a healthier balance of social media use, allowing them to cultivate connectedness and improve mental well-being.
- It informs future researchers that although mental well-being is associated with more social media use, they can search for the explanations and possible factors.

Strengths and Limitations

- Socioeconomic status and region of residence are among the two most diverse categories, allowing the study to represent a large sample of individuals
- The study did not account for adolescents who may already be receiving mental health services. This may impact if social media is the main source of improving positive well-being, or if there are secondary causes as well.

REFERENCES

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