

Background Research

Social media use has been widely hypothesised to have negative effects on mental health. It was my interest to debunk this claim by promoting healthy social media use. Following the work of Yang et al. (2021) and Lewin et al. (2023), who linked active social media use (ASMU) with reduced loneliness among the elderly, it was my interest to investigate whether this would extend to that of a student population.

The Research

This study investigated how social media use relates to loneliness among 99 UK students aged 18-31. I measured active social media use, passive social media use (PSMU) as well as the time spent using social media per day and loneliness. ASMU refers to “targeted one-on-one exchanges”, such as actively posting content or sending private messages. On the contrary, PSMU refers to the act of “observing” online, whereby one may scroll through others’ content but will not engage with them, or post content themselves. It has been shown that directed communication online (i.e. active use) is linked with lower levels of loneliness, whilst, low engagement with others (i.e. passive use) tends to leave users feeling little companionship. I hypothesised that those who score higher on ASMU and lower on PSMU, will score lower on loneliness.

Participants answered questions from a six-item ASMU scale, a five item Passive SNS Use (PSNSU) scale, the UCLA loneliness scale, as well as declaring how long they spend on social media on an average day. Following this, a multiple regression analysis was performed with three main predictors – ASMU, PSMU and time spent using social media (per day). The outcome variable for each condition was loneliness.

Findings

A multiple regression analysis showed none of the predictors predict loneliness. These results do not support the hypothesis that those who score higher on ASMU and lower on PSMU, will score lower on loneliness. There were a number of possible explanations as to why results did not reach expectations, namely, the differences in content consumed among age groups, the obsequious nature of social media among the younger generation, the under-powered data due to low sample size and the lack of universal measure for ASMU and PSMU – all of which I recommended for implementation within future research.

With the considerations of this given research’s limitations, future research has the ability to reiterate the benefits of using social media and, by extension, recommend active use among adolescents in order to promote greater well-being. If found to be statistically true, this research would imply a sufficient implication to societal beliefs surrounding social media use and mental health, i.e. the common assumption that social media is detrimental to mental health