

What it Means to Be Connected: The Effects of Social Media on Connectivity and Well-Being

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Abstract

The rise in the use of social media has given us the illusion of connection, but research has been split as to whether this is accurate. Some researchers would even argue that we are even more disconnected than ever. This study further explored the influence of social media by identifying people's perceptions of connection, obtaining a better understanding of the effects of social media on mental health, and exploring how we might create tools that would facilitate these critical connections. In particular, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 participants whose ages ranged from 20 to 60 years old. The research uncovered how people view connections and their importance in mental health and also how social media has contributed to these perceptions. The significant findings from the study were that social media acts as a supplement to in-person connection but it does not replace face-to-face interactions and that there were both positive and negative effects on mental health.

Introduction

Connections, in person or not, are critical for mental and even physical health (Holt-Lunstad, 2018,). The rise in social media use has given us the illusion of connection. We not only use it to receive news, entertainment, and share information with others, but we also use it to maintain relationships with friends and keep in touch with distant family members. But is social media connecting us? And how genuine are those connections? How do those connections impact our well-being? Research has been split on whether social media is connecting us and whether it is beneficial to our health and well-being. For instance, Ellison et al. (2007) suggest that social media usage can increase our "social capital" allowing us to keep our social network and maintain that important connectivity long after physically disconnecting from a group. Examples of this would be maintaining contact with college friends after graduation or keeping up with a co-worker after they move away. Without social media and the ability to connect virtually, that connection would have been much harder. Conversely, it has been discovered that increased social media usage can reduce the number of in-person interactions, leading, in some cases, to increased social isolation (Ahn, 2013). There is also research that suggests that feelings of jealousy or the fear of missing out caused from interacting with social media can also lead to feelings of disconnection (Roberts et al., 2019)

Therefore, this study further explored the influence of social media by identifying people's perceptions of connection, obtaining a better understanding of the effects of social media on mental health, and exploring how we might create tools that would facilitate these critical connections. Particularly, the results of this research helped reveal how people's perceptions of connection have changed and how social media has impacted these perceptions. Our hypothesis was that age had a significant factor on the perception of connection and a predictor of the level of social media usage. We suspected that the older the user, the less impacted they were by the stresses of social media usage and the less dependent they were on it for making and keeping connections. By illuminating causes of the negative effects of social media on people in different age groups, we hope to inform audiences on how to leverage its positive effects and show ways to form genuine connections in our community, using both traditional and virtual methods.

Literature Review

After conducting secondary research, the research team was able to develop the hypothesis that social media has impacted the way we connect and our mental well-being. Our research indicated a number of things but in summary, humans need connection, social media has an impact on how we connect, social media had an impact on our mental well-being, there are both negative and positive effects of social media, and that some of the reason social media has such an impact on connection and mental health is people's desire to belong.

Social Media and Connection

As humans, people need connection. Even from a young age, people desire relationships and touch from other humans. Holt-Lunstad (2018) provides an interesting perspective on our need for contacts. Her research focuses on whether this need may be biological. As one of the most vulnerable species at birth, we rely solely on others for care. The author's research suggests connection is a biological need that may be tied to survival and affect mental and physical health.

Over the years, the way how people connect with each other have been changed due to the rise of social media platforms and other communication technologies. Although social media makes it easier for people to build connections, it becomes difficult for people to make authentic and genuine connections using social media. Turkle (2019) explains in their research that humans have a tendency to turn to technology when they are at their lowest, which has led to loneliness becoming the most prevalent ailment in the modern world. Although social media allows people to make connections with anyone in the world, research shows that people are unable to mentally maintain and

manage 150 social relationships at once. In addition, Pew Research center (2006) found that the connectedness that the internet and other media foster within social networks has real payoffs: People mainly use the internet to contact others when they need help. The internet promotes “networked individualism” by allowing people to seek help from appropriate people and resources. But, as questioned by Wee et al. (2017): “a person can have hundreds of “friends” on Facebook, but how many are genuine?”

Social Media and Mental Well-Being

Social media not only changes how people connect with each other, but also produces both negative and positive impacts on people’s mental health. The influence of social media on mental health has been investigated by numerous researchers. Yen et al. (2012) found that online interaction reduces social anxiety compared to face-to-face interaction, particularly for those with high levels of social anxiety and depression. This study suggests that virtual communication has the potential to be used as an alternative way to disseminate information for people who experienced social anxiety. However, the prolonged usage of social networking sites may contribute to depression (Yen et al. ,2012). Additionally, this study may have shown a connection between certain social networking site habits and low self-esteem. Otte (2022) indicated that 46 percent of Americans who use social media report the feeling of being lonely or isolated. The article talks about how this can happen even though we are connected to so many. We can have hundreds of “friends” on social media, but these connections are not real and do not satisfy the human need to connect on a fundamental level. Instead, we get only surface or superficial information.

Dijck (2013) explains that we are increasingly embedded in social media and its role in our everyday lives. He takes a critical look at not only the history of social media but also the economics and psycho-social impacts that social media has had. With so many technological advancements, like the internet and social media, we are all constantly connecting with one another. Sharing everything and ‘liking’ things is all public and can play a role in decreased privacy. Dijck also suggests that much of these social media connections between people are contrived and orchestrated. The more we like and interact on platforms like Facebook, the more the algorithms and coding learn about how our habits and likes. It changes what we see on the screen and people we come in contact with- even ads and becomes an almost contrived experience. In LaRose et al. (2014), the demands of maintaining relationships with friends, followers, and close friends on social media sites were associated significantly with the negative effect in the route model evaluated here. However, it’s also possible that other factors in a person’s life, such as loneliness and depression, could be to blame for the negative effects of social media usage.

Roberts et al. (2019) explain that, as humans, our behavior is heavily influenced by the fundamental human desire to belong. The researchers conducted two studies to learn the impact of the fear of missing out (FOMO) on connection and well-being. The studies ultimately found negative and positive effects on the participants' relationships and well-being due to FOMO. Additionally, Ahn et al. (2013) found that media use can lead to displacement because this use reduces the amount of time spent on face-to-face communication without facilitating the avoidance of social isolation, thereby limiting subjective well-being. Social media usage can result in higher inclusion anxiety and need to belong has increased the need for “likes” and social acceptance that may be causing mental distress (Greenwood, 2013).

Overall, these sources all support our research. As humans, we need connection. It is a fundamental need we have from the day we are born. However, our idea of connection has changed over time due to technology like the internet and social media. Social media has had both negative and positive impacts on our connections as well as mental health. We have the ability to connect with people we otherwise would not be able to on a daily basis. We can maintain connections that may have been difficult due to distance and time. However, there can also be negative consequences of this easy access and constant exposure to people virtually.

Methodology

A semi-structured interview was adopted as the main data collection method to reveal participants' experiences during the activity to answer the research question— how does one define connection in the age of social media and the internet? What effect does such a connection have on the mental and physical well-being of a person? The interview questions were informed by the literature review. Based on the research during the literature review and our interest in learning about connection, we drafted a list of interview questions for a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview was very important for the research as we wanted to understand participants' thoughts and beliefs about connection. It is not easy to define connection. So, a semi-structured interview would provide participants with a platform to tell their stories and examples which we would later analyze to culminate the definition of connection.

The protocol of this research was approved by IRB. The user semi-structured interviews consisted of 14 participants - eight were female and six were males. The age range was from 20– 60 years old. Participants were recruited through Ball State Communications Center, email, and word of mouth. Our team utilized the campus Communication Center to place the call out for participants. The requirement was participants should be at least 18 years of age and social media users. Participants

were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could opt-out at any time without penalty. After participants signed the consent forms, an interview was conducted virtually or in person where they were asked questions that made them think deeply about connection, their social media usage, and their overall well-being. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Below are a few of the interview questions asked to participants.

- Participant 1: Female, 60 years old
- Participant 2: Male, 49 years old
- Participant 3: Male, 58 years old
- Participant 4: Male, 29 years old
- Participant 5: Female, 26 years old
- Participant 6: Male 26 years old
- Participant 7: Female 28 years old
- Participant 8: Female 21 years old
- Participant 9: Female 25 years old
- Participant 10: Female, 56 yers old
- Participant 11: Female, 46 years old
- Participant 12: Female, 36 years old
- Participant 13: Male, 33 years old
- Participant 14: Male, 22 years old

Research Question	Interview Questions
Connection and Social Media	• What does connection mean to you? • What role does social media play in defining connection for you? • Do you feel that social media has changed how people connect? If so, how? • Have you formed a true connection using social media platforms? If yes, could you tell us the story?
Mental and Physical Well-being	• How do connections (or lack of them) impact your daily life? • If you were feeling lonely, would you prefer to meet in person, talk on the phone, or chat online?

	• Have you ever felt the need to take a break from social media? Explain. • How does what you see/read on social media affect you? Explain.
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The questions such as “What does connection mean to you?” and “Have you formed a true connection using social media platforms? If yes, could you tell us the story?” gave insightful information about participants' definition of connection. What does true connection mean to participants and whether social media helped them form a true connection? Questions such as “Do you feel that social media has changed how people connect? If so, how? and “Has the meaning of connection ever changed for you? Explain.” provided information about how the definition of connection has been changed and the role of social media in changing that definition. Questions such as “How do connections (or lack of them) impact your daily life?” and How does what you see/read on social media affect you? provided information about the impacts of social media on people's well-being.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the gathered interview data (Li, 2020). A good way to examine the views of several research participants, emphasize similarities and differences, and produce unexpected findings is through thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Initial codes were developed before starting the analysis process. After developing initial codes, the transcripts were read line by line to look for patterns that were related to these codes. After iterative cycles of reading and coding, the codes that did not represent the patterns of the data were removed. The research team defined various codes while conducting the thematic analysis. Then the meaning of those codes was interpreted and summarized the insights generated into themes, which will be introduced in the next section.

Results

Research Question One: How do we define connection?

Theme 1: Intimate bond with someone

“Connection is when two people, let's say me and my friend understand each other, like let's say when we're speaking, we would know, oh, this is the next thing this person is gonna say. So that's a connection, that's a bond. When I want to go out to eat, I know

the other person would wanna eat, and then we know each other's way of thinking that is a connection.” (P6)

This participant defined deep connection as an intimate bond between two people which surpasses time, space, and language. Surpassing time, space, and language means that if two people share a deep connection then they do not need language to communicate with each other. A person with whom you share a deep connection with can sense your energy and aura and predict how you are feeling. They can often notice if their connection is in trouble or is in a good mood. They can understand each other's feelings without further communication.

“Knowing someone or having a deep connection means being able to predict what they would do in a situation. Like knowing how they would act and what their reactions would be, to something in the world.”(P8)

“There's a mutual understanding between two people or a mutual interest shared between two people where they can almost look at each other or they can like, read each other and be alright, so we're both on the same page.” (P14)

These quotes showcase deep connection as almost having a superpower like telepathy. To all these participants, a deep connection comprises a telepathic power of being able to communicate with each other without the tools of communication such as language, gestures, or expression.

In addition to these feelings of deep understanding, the participants described connection as a bond with a person or people where there is engagement and communication. People with deep connection care for each other and the interaction are genuine and authentic.

“Being able to bond with someone in the more authentic and genuine, the better. (P5)

“A line of people, people who care for you. (P1)”

Theme 2: Shared understanding / seek advice / or safe space to be able to share emotion.

1. "shared understanding/emotion"

“A deep connection is where we're able to have conversations about things that are important to us and share our emotions.”(P5)

We asked participant 5 to elaborate “what is included in “things” when they said - conversation about things? The participant said that “things” include their belief system about the world. In today's world everybody is extremely sensitive. Everyone has a mobile phone where they can record and edit certain segment of what is being said and make a viral video of a misinterpreted messages. You can receive unimaginable amount of hate for few lines you said which is taken out of context. One has to think hundred times before speaking anything so that they do not accidentally end up offending someone or getting viral for a wrong reason. Therefore, for them a close connection is someone they are able to have an open discussion about the world issues because they have shared understanding.

“It entails communicating about deeper issues, maybe gender issues or like cultural issues or lifestyle adjustment or, you know, family issues that, you know, create a bridge with another person. So like sharing problems or like thoughts or perspectives. That's what it is for me, connection.” (P7)

Each individual has their own views of different issues of the world like gender equality, political issues, environmental issues etc. To these participants their close connection will have similar views on the issues of the world. They can have a productive discussion about these issues with their close connection. They can even collaborate to make changes in the world regarding these issues.

To these participants, a true connection means a shared understanding of each other. We all understand the world through our own perspective. If you have a deeper connection with someone then your and the other person's way of understanding the world will be similar.

2. "trust or not being judged / seek advice"

“I feel that connection is more about vulnerability, intimacy, like understanding of each other instead of just speaking instead of just talking going over life.” (P8)

“Typically people that I choose to go to for either opinions or help or something of that nature.”(P11)

Many of these participants defined connection as having a relationship with someone with whom they can be vulnerable. They can share their secrets, fears, and problems without being judged. The connection listens to understand their point of view and provides advice to navigate through life's problems. They communicate with each other and help each other grow in this world. If people have a deeper connection with

someone then they are more likely to understand the meaning behind the sentences said by each other.

We asked participants if their definition of connection ever changed. Participants said that they used to think having conversations and hanging out with someone meant they have a deeper connection. Now they have realized that conversation and hangouts are tools to help form deep connections. But the person who you hang out with and have conversations with might not be your deep connection.

In addition , we asked participants to use words that would describe how they would feel if they did not have a deep connection. The words they used were empty, lonely, meaningless, void, isolated, sad, etc.

In conclusion deep connection is someone who cares for you, who understands you without much conversation. They share similar thought process and will let you share your emotion without judgement. Without these deep conenction you life will be empty and meaningless.

Research Question Two: How does social media influence the definition of connection?

Theme 1: Maintaining already established connections

The research was conducted on men and women from ages 21 to 60. Age and gender were not determining factors in the opinions of social media use or their definition of connection. Most respondents mentioned, in some form, that it was easier now to connect with family and friends that live far away or maintain relationships with those that passed through their lives, such as former co-workers, classmates, or friends and family that have moved away. The use of social media allows people to keep in contact with those that are distant and not possible to see or communicate with in person. Still, these online-only connections are not as deep or genuine as those we develop face-to-face. These online connections through social media cannot replace our relationships with people we can talk to and see regularly. As this participant suggested, "Social media is now another way to connect, but again, it does not feel as meaningful. It feels like it's almost too easy; like something that's not real." (P1)

Several respondents indicated that they appreciated the ability to maintain this contact with people, but without the in-person contact, it was more of a superficial relationship. People can curate what they post online, which may not accurately represent what is going on in their lives or what they are like. Two respondents (P1 and P2) likened social media, specifically Facebook, to an online scrapbook or photo album. Another

participant considered themselves a scroller only – meaning one who only reads through posts but does not post content themselves.

“I feel like I'm able to feel a little bit more connected to what's going on in other people's lives, but I do not really provide content that would allow people to do the same with my life. I'm kind of an introverted person, and also, I never feel the impulse to share on social media. So, it's not reciprocal.” (P12)

“I feel like it connects me with people that I do not get to see on a regular basis. I know that maybe when I was younger, I got to see a lot of, but then as we've gotten older and we've each had our families, and, you know, you kind of, you know, you just grow apart, you do not see each other. I think it helps me stay in touch and kind of know what's going on with their lives. Also, people like I graduated with or even former co-workers. I would say that it helps me stay connected with people who have passed through my life in a favorable way. Yeah, I just like to see what's going on with them.” (P10)

Theme 2: Not as genuine as in-person connection

One participant expressed that online connections and relationships did not seem real because of the lack of face-to-face interaction.

“[If we were] face-to-face, I would see their body language, their facial expressions, and they are not conveyed on social media. It's harder for me to assess my relationship with that person in terms of creating a long-term relationship.” (P6)

So, despite the ease of maintaining connections by using social media, it does not replace in-person connections. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that in-person connections are more valuable and a better way to communicate overall. Even though a few participants mentioned connecting with people online that they would not have been able to communicate with without social media (via online gaming or business networking), they did not consider those as meaningful as the relationships and connections they hold in person. This was a surprising result given the amount of friend suggestions and group suggestions that platforms like Facebook and Instagram provide. Even with all of those nudges, researchers found that in-person connections were much more highly valued and that any connections made online were not viewed as genuine. At times, known connections and friendships were able to be maintained more easily and could become stronger because of social media, but researchers did not find that those connections developed via social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram.

“I think most of the people I've been friends with on social media were people I already knew. I do feel like in one or two cases that a friendship has gotten stronger because of an engagement on social media. Like someone I knew and accepted as a friend, we would get in a conversation, you know, offline or something about something, or she, I think she sent me a note of concern one time and we ended up becoming stronger friends. But initially forming a relationship on social media, I don't, I don't think I can recall one.” (P1)

“I've never had an online friend. Like I've never been able to, I am an introvert and keep my circles extremely, extremely small. So the idea of having someone strictly online wouldn't be the connection that I would need.” (P8)

“When it comes to receiving guidance. I feel it is much more proactive, to speak to people I know like meeting them in real life, like calling my calling my parents or speaking with a friend and that comes with you know, maybe personal things within my academic or professional life or personal things outside of that, like my emotions, my interactions with other people. All all of those things. Stick to explicit persons in my life that like I can name and, you know, I don't think it's very good to go to people you can't name for that type of guidance or what you're looking for, if they don't know you. They don't know you. You don't know. There's a lot of context that is missing. that is necessary to make those conversations. Have a good outcome.” (P14)

Research Question Three: How does social media impact mental health?

As anticipated, we found that social media positively and negatively impacts mental health. Age does seem to play a role in how social media affects users' mental health. Participants in their thirties and older suffered less emotional distress when it came to the use of social media. Younger respondents in their twenties seem to have experienced more negative mental health impacts from social media use. The most significant cause of this distress is the fear of missing out (FOMO) effect or from comparing oneself to others. It was also found that the use of social media as a platform for political rants and debates was a stressor and resulted in negative feelings. The positive impacts on mental included satisfying the need for social interaction when in-person isn't possible and the quick and easy entertainment value it provided for participants.

Negative Impacts on mental health

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)/Comparing Oneself to Others

"It's become a trend that people who are successful post about their lives, and you get a false sense of, oh, everyone's life should be like this. And I was really judging my life because, based on that, that put me at a place where I was not as self-confident." (P6).

"I tend to scroll through that feed, which I do not do all that often. I tend to get very, oh, I get upset and frustrated that, oh well, all these people are succeeding." (P14)

"I definitely think it's a highlight reel." (P9)

"I can scroll through social media and look at someone's photos or look at someone's post, and I start to internalize those things and I start to hate my life. I hate myself, I hate my body." (P5)

"I'm a fairly sensitive person, and hyper aware of what people say and think around me and I probably assume too much about what other people are thinking. And so whether it's positive or negative, I think that that drastically affects my response, my mood, my attitude towards our environment or situation that we're in, I would say, I play a lot off of the energy that I get from another person." (P12)

Some, but not all, of the older participants did not seem as bothered by FOMO or feelings of inadequacy. The negative impacts appear to be more about social media being used as a platform for political debate. Forty-two percent of the respondents mentioned politics on social media negatively impacting their mental health. Most of these respondents were over the age of 30.

Use as political platform causing division

While social media does provide the ability to connect with one another, sometimes those connections are not valued. Over time, people changed the way they used social media and began using it as a platform to incite political rants or debate. This use seemed to divide users rather than bring them together causing stress. At it's worst, it divided what were once friends or family.

"There was a while ago when social media was having a negative impact on my well being and that was when all the political whatever, and I just eliminated that for my life. I do not go on social media to talk about politics. I do not have friends that all they want to do is rant, I hear that enough. I read it enough in the news so I got rid of that. So for the most part, social media is a positive place for me now." (P1)

"Sometimes, a lot of people will use Facebook or social media in general as a platform for a cause or a point of view, political stance, whatever, and I feel like they have that right. And I, however, I think sometimes people bring things to Facebook that they should not, and it creates this bad thing." (P10)

“I immediately, like, put them in a category. Like, this is a person that I trust, this is a person that I value their input, and I can relate to, or this is a person that is on the deep end politically, and really would not choose to interact with that person anymore. Or, I mean, I'm sure there are several categories, but I definitely think that how I look at other people and, and organizations, companies, like any, any brand, any message that they put out on social media. It I think that I definitely say, Okay, this is a person I'm willing to follow, because I value our values align, or our values don't align. So I'm not following them anymore. So I would say I'm pretty strongly impacted by what people share on online.” (P12)

Obligation

Another theme that came up with older participants was that social media felt more like an obligation than a source of entertainment or connection. Initially, it was fun to catch up with friends, but as friend lists or followers grew, the level of exhaustion increased and the amount of time spent on social media was viewed as a negative. One participant described social media as a “fun, shiny new toy” (P11), but over time became something you felt obligated to keep up with. Since that was where many people congregated online, shared important life events, and kept up on one another, participants felt obligated to do the same. It became important to grow your friends list and increase followers.

“And you know, it's like if you have a hundred friends on Facebook that's exhausting. If you feel like you have to pay tribute to a hundred people every day, I find it exhausting just to make sure I stay up with what my kids are doing or my parents. I do not have that kind of time” (P10, age 56)

“Now it's more, it feels like a duty I have to do.” (P1, age 60)

In general, our research seemed to indicate that younger social media users are more engaged in platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram and it seems to indicate that because of this increased engagement, there are more negative impacts felt because their lives and the lives of their friends are all displayed on social media.

Positive Impacts on mental health

Satisfy Social Needs

As mentioned earlier, many participants indicated that it was a convenient way to connect with people they already know that they do not get to see regularly. Because of this, it had a positive impact because they were still able to follow people that are important in their lives. For most, this was not a replacement for in-person interaction,

but it helped keep those connections that would have been harder. One participant (P12) indicated that because they were very introverted, social media helped her fill her “social meter.” That was all the interaction she needed, and it was on her terms. This response seemed to be an outlier, however most respondents still preferred in-person conversation and interactions, but nearly all appreciated maintaining connections to people they already know online. Surprisingly, most participants did not use social media to form new connections. However, having a convenient way to catch up with friends and family was found to positively impact mental well-being.

“I’ve enjoyed Facebook because that’s how I keep up and find out, you know, how my kids, how my friends’ kids are growing up and what’s happening in their lives, that kind of thing. The scrapbook, if you will.” (P1)

“It’s almost a self-reflection piece. In some ways. It kind of replaced the old school photo album.” (P2)

“I do feel like I’m up to speed a little bit more than I would’ve otherwise on, you know, updates of, you know, my friends, what’s going on in their lives.” (P3)

Satisfy Entertainment Needs

Another positive impact was simply the entertainment factor. When bored, participants turned to social media to fill this time rather than reach out to friends and family in person due to the ease and convenience of social media platforms. While one respondent viewed this as a “lazy” (P10) way to communicate, the convenience of it was viewed as positive.

“Social media and connection is really my way of tracking people that I know to see what’s up in the world, to see them going on in their lives with their views on any type of things that they choose to put out. They’re kind of my go-to for whenever I’m bored.” (P11)

“A lot of times if it can make me laugh out loud like, you know, stupid like memes or, or you know, even trends that are kind of ridiculous. I think those are fun.” (P13)

“I feel like social media is kind of a different way to stay connected rather than that direct one-on-one connection. And I also just, I like seeing things that other people post. You know, people that I graduated with are getting engaged and having babies. Like I really love knowing those things and being able to see pictures and pictures of weddings and kind of stay involved.” (P5)

A few participants mentioned having to take a break from social media from time to time for various reasons, time as its negative effects on mental health, but the overwhelming trend seems to be that they remain regular users. So, the benefits of being connected in that way must outweigh the negatives. Over time, participants have learned to adapt to social media and, for the most part, have figured out how to tune out those negative aspects. It is a source of connection and entertainment and if we build on those aspects, we should develop tools that would benefit users.

Discussion

While reviewing prior research, the research team learned about the impact social media has on a person's well-being, the desire to belong, and the fear of missing out. The definition of connection was more clearly defined during the secondary research when speaking to the participants. Several individuals described it as a bond with a person or people where there was engagement and communication. It was also discovered that there was frequently an emotional component to this bond.

It was also discovered that social media served to supplement this connection. Although many of the connections that were being strengthened were already established, a small number of participants made new connections through social media. Social media does, however, serve as a supplement to connection; it does not take the place of genuine, in-person interaction. Many participants said that social media was superficial and that it only displayed people's life's high points. Nearly all respondents valued keeping in touch with people they already know online. Most respondents still favored in-person conversation and interactions. Surprisingly, few individuals used social media to establish new relationships. While some of the participants noted making connections with other people online, they wouldn't have otherwise been able to, they did not find those ties to be as significant as the ones they have in person. While this study did not find a correlation between social media and loneliness, a prior study (Twenge, et al, 2019) found that there was a positive correlation between lack of in-person social activity, increased social media usage, and loneliness and that this took a sharp uptick around 2011 as social media platforms like Facebook really started to take off.

The researchers gained many insights into the positive and negative effects of social media usage. People reported that they were able to maintain relationships even when they were separated by great distances, social media serves as a photo album or scrapbook of their experiences, and friends frequently share encouraging words or news that makes people smile or laugh. Prior research on families and social media also supports this finding.

“For families with limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction, social media can be a vital communication medium to help shape the family identity, maintain bonds, and accomplish shared tasks.” (Abel, et al, 2021. p.632)

A few of the negatives of social media include that it is seen as a time waster, it appears superficial or fake, that it can lead to sentiments of self-deprecation when compared to others, and that it is frequently seen as an obligation. It was also learned that social media usage could also be the catalyst for heated political debate and other divisive topics leading to negative reactions. However, participants have become accustomed to social media over time and, for the most part, have learned how to tune out the negative aspects and instead, focus on the positive.

By merging the definition and desire for connection with the impact that social media has on that connection, this study contributed to the body of knowledge on those topics. Insight was gained on how individuals view connection and how important it is to them. Even one user claimed that connection is what keeps life moving forward.

Limitations

The researchers run into certain limitations with the study. The bulk of the participants in the study, whether they were students or employees, were a part of the Ball State community. The second limitation was regarding the questions asked of the participants. After conducting the interviews, it was discovered that there were gaps in the questions asked. The fact that the study was about social media impacted respondents' responses about their concept of connection, the researchers felt that if they had kept the title of the study confidential then the answers may have not been skewed. Also, to learn more about what a true connection is, more questions should have been asked about connection. Although we did get a lot of useful responses, more relevant data for the study could have been found if there had been more questions surrounding that part of the study.

References

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