



Adolescent social media use and mental health from adolescent and parent perspectives



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated adolescent and parent reports of adolescent social media use and its relation to adolescent psychosocial adjustment. The sample consisted of 226 participants (113 parent-adolescent dyads) from throughout the United States, with adolescents (55 males, 51 females, 7 unreported) ranging from ages 14 to 17. Parent and adolescent reports of the number of adolescents' social media accounts were moderately correlated with parent-reported DSM-5 symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity/impulsivity, ODD, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, as well as adolescent-reported fear of missing out (FoMO) and loneliness. Lastly, anxiety and depressive symptoms were highest among adolescents with a relatively high number of parent-reported social media accounts and relatively high FoMO. The implications of these findings and need for related longitudinal studies are discussed.

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Because most research on the link between social media activity and psychosocial adjustment is based on young adults, it is not clear how well the findings apply to the generation of adolescents who have never known a world without such platforms and who presumably have frequent contact with social media. Emerging evidence is mixed (Seabrook, Kern, & Rickard, 2016), although there is some indication of a general connection between adolescent social media use and negative indicators of health (e.g., sleep problems, anxiety, lower self-esteem; Ehrenreich & Underwood, 2016; Woods & Scott, 2016). However, there may also be adaptive aspects of social media use for adolescents, such as in perceived connectedness to others. Beyond cohort effects, adolescence may represent a developmental context during which individuals are particularly susceptible to potentially negative impacts of social media given an emphasis on social connectedness during this period and a possibility that social media experiences may engender feelings of exclusion or victimization (see Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017).

On the other hand, adolescents may experience a number of perceived benefits of social media, including greater connectedness with others via the ease with which they may identify and/or interact with others on social media. Parental perspectives on, and knowledge of, teen social media use, as well as the reported connections between parents and adolescents on social media applications, may also be important in advancing understanding of the role of social media on youth adjustment. Thus, the present study investigated the mental health correlates of social media use and parental monitoring of

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social media use with parent and adolescent informants. Specifically, parents reported on their teens' social media use and symptoms of internalizing and externalizing problems, whereas adolescents provided data on their fear of missing out (FoMO), perceived loneliness, and social media use.

The present study represents an area of ever-growing importance, as approximately 24% of U.S. teens report being on-line "almost constantly" with much of that time being spent on social media applications (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, the potential maladaptive or adaptive developmental and mental health implications of social media activity in youth are relatively undetermined. For instance, it is not clear how parameters of social media activity (e.g., number of accounts, frequency of checking) relate to psychosocial functioning. It has been proposed via Coconstruction Theory that social media allow youth to construct their social media reality based on what they post and their network of followers/friends; consequently, one could expect some degree of continuity between social media experiences and off-line experiences (Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017). Theoretically, youth who experience more difficulties with inattention or impulsivity may be drawn to the quick, easily accessible format of interacting with others via social media (Burnell & Kutner, 2016). Youth who feel lonely or experience depression or anxiety may prefer interactions with others in these more indirect formats (Shaw & Gant, 2002), underscoring potentially positive aspects of social media for some adolescents.

One of the relatively few quantitative adolescent studies to date noted that more contact with parents on social media was related to better adjustment in terms of lower emotional problems and delinquency (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Day, Harper, & Stockdale, 2014), pointing to an adaptive role of parental monitoring and supervision of social media activity. Moreover, adolescent-reported social media use and emotional investment in social media have shown a relation to poor sleep quality, anxiety, and depression (Woods & Scott, 2016). These findings, although informative, do not fully address multi-informant perspectives on variables such as frequency and variety of social media use and their relation to an array of indicators of adolescent psychological well-being (e.g., behavioral problems, connectedness to others/loneliness).

Multiple assessment methods, including parental perceptions of adolescents' social media use, allow a more complete picture of how social media use might relate to adolescent adjustment. Further, parental monitoring and closer parent-child connections on social media may promote more adaptive uses of social media, whereas a disconnect between adolescent social media use and parental awareness is potentially problematic in terms of adolescent mental health. This parental awareness may be particularly important, as research has begun to document how specific experiences on social media may translate to problems in adolescent behavioral and emotional adjustment (see Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017). However, the emerging research provides mixed conclusions on such a connection. For instance, direct measures of social media use have shown no clear association with depression among college students (Jelenchick, Eickhoff, & Moreno, 2013), and a systematic review of studies with adolescent and adult samples shows mixed findings in the relations of anxiety and depression with social media use (Seabrook et al., 2016). That review also emphasized that research in this area has been over-reliant on self-report of both social media use and psychosocial variables of interest. Nevertheless, if correlations between reports of social media activity and adolescent adjustment are apparent, they may serve to inform the circumstances under which adolescents are drawn to social media or its potential deleterious, as well as adaptive, effects.

To this end, research in the area of social media behavior (e.g., Beyens, Frison, & Eggermont, 2016; Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013) has described FoMO as a factor that may explain some motivations for higher activity on social media. Przybylski et al. (2013) describe FoMO as "the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing" (p. 1841) and distress regarding the possibility that others are having rewarding experiences in one's absence. Recent research with adolescents (Beyens et al., 2016) demonstrated that FoMO is associated with higher Facebook use and preoccupation with feeling unpopular or isolated on Facebook. Because adolescence is a time of heightened desire for connectedness with peers, and many present-day adolescent social connections and interactions take place via social media, FoMO is likely salient for some adolescents. Woods and Scott (2016) suggested that emotional investment in social media, perhaps indicative of FoMO, portends higher distress among individuals who have limited access to social media. Use of social media as well as technology-related anxiety (e.g., distress about not checking social media) has been tied to mood disorder symptoms in young adults (Rosen, Whaling, Rab, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013). Thus, for many adolescents, social media use may be correlated with higher anxiety and mood-related symptoms, particularly for those who are motivated to use social media because of subjective distress such as FoMO.

It is possible that frequent social media use fulfills adolescents' needs for connectedness, but alternatively, social media activity could also signify feelings of loneliness. Adolescents' positive peer affiliations (e.g., Lansford, Dodge, Fontaine, Bates, & Pettit, 2014) and perceived connectedness to peers, family, neighborhood, and school are thought to mitigate some negative outcomes such as delinquency and risk behavior (see Bernat & Resnick, 2009). In college students, the number of an individual's close Facebook friends (i.e., those designated as "close" by respondents) has shown a negative correlation with loneliness (Lemieux, Lajoie, & Trainor, 2013). Likewise, it may be that adolescents who are relatively high on social media engagement report more connectedness to others (i.e., lower loneliness) and that lower loneliness in combination with high social media activity might mitigate internalizing problems (Szwedo, Mikami, & Allen, 2012).

However, it remains unclear whether social media provide a positive or meaningful sense of affiliation and connectedness for adolescents. For instance, it may be that social media activity is tied to greater perceived loneliness and other mental health and psychosocial difficulties. Some evidence among college students suggests that the connection between social media activity and loneliness varies as a function of the type of social media application (i.e., text vs. image; Pittman & Reich, 2016). Furthermore, adolescents may seek out social media when they are less engaged in face-to-face encounters with others or may feel that they are missing out on important social activities when viewing such events on social media. Thus, the

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