

The Relationship between Social Media Use and Social Anxiety Disorder in College Students

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Abstract:

Social media has been integrated into the daily life of colleges. It assists students in interacting, communicating, and educating, but it also causes mental health issues. Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is a widespread psychological condition among young adults and it is usually marked by apprehension of being judged and shunning out of social interaction. This article is a literature review of the connection between the use of social media and SAD in college students. The results indicate that social media may be effective in social support but also increases anxiety due to social comparison, the fear of negative evaluation, and sleep disturbances. The correlation between social media and SAD is in two way: students who experience high level of social anxiety are more inclined to use social media and overuse or passive usage may aggravate symptoms. Other factors like loneliness, self-esteem, and sleeping habits are also mediating factors discussed in this paper and a conclusion is given on how college students can be encouraged to engage in healthy and mindful use of the digital world.

Keywords: Social media use; social anxiety disorder; college students

1. Introduction

Social media like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are social media platforms, which are now unavoidable in college life. They are used by students to communicate, form communities and even access educational materials. Nevertheless, the insecurity and stress can also be induced by the regular presence of social comparison and assessment. Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is an ongoing fear of being judged or humiliated in social contexts that in most cases

results in avoidance and emotional distress [1]. Since the onset of SAD mostly occurs during adolescence, college students are prone to the effects of this disorder that can affect their academic, social and overall health [2]. As explained by cognitive-behavioral models like Clark and Wells, individuals who fear social anxiety have a propensity to over concentrate about them, they make use of safety behaviors to avoid being judged and ruminate after a social interaction [3]. These trends are enhanced by social me-

dia, which offers unlimited chances to judge the content, which at the time of likes, comments, and subscribers, reflect the fear of being judged in real life [4]. This means that social media may act as a coping mechanism and worsen effects of anxiety. This is because the paper examines the interaction between social media use and social anxiety among college students. It synthesizes empirical results and theoretical conceptualizations to understand mechanisms that connect digital behaviors with SAD like fear of negative evaluation, social comparison and online safety behaviors. The paper ends by giving recommendations on the advancement of digital well-being and incorporating the understanding of the use of social media into mental health interventions.

In this paper, the method of literature review is used. A systematic literature review technique was used in this paper. The keywords which were used to find relevant studies in PsycINFO, PubMed, and Google Scholar were social anxiety disorder, college students, social media use, fear of negative evaluation, and problematic social media use. Search narrowed down to peer-reviewed articles that were published in the year 2013 to 2024. Inclusion criteria were that the study had to [1] be interested in college or young adult populations, [2] had to measure social anxiety symptoms or diagnosed SAD, and [3] had to measure patterns of social media use or digital behaviors. Research studies that had concentrated on clinical populations alone and were not based on empirical evidence or studies that had not been conducted on social anxiety were excluded. Reviews on full texts were conducted after initial screening as per title and abstract, just to determine that its relevance and quality in methods.

2. Understanding Social Anxiety Disorder

One of the most common anxiety disorders is the Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) where lifetime prevalence rate is estimated to be between 7-12 percent in the United States [5]. It entails extreme fear, or anxiety in those situations when people may be noticed, judged, and judged unfavorably. Such common symptoms can be physical reactions such as blushing and trembling, cognitive reactions such as the self-censure and fear of failure, and behavioral avoidance of social interactions [1]. SAD normally appears in adolescence and may continue in the adulthood in case there is no treatment.

The cognitive-behavioral model, developed by Clark and Wells posits that people with SAD focus too much attention upon themselves and are constantly evaluating their performance and have so-called safety behaviors, such as eye-contact avoidance, rehearsing dialogue, or over-pre-

paring a presentation, to engage in perceived social failure [3]. These actions offer short term amelioration though they strengthen the assumption that social circumstances are harmful. These mechanisms render SAD chronic and self-perpetuating. Notably, several of these processes can be found in the digital environments, where the users can observe their perceptions online through user monitoring and use unclear signals to understand they are rejected or disapproved.

SAD may have severe impacts on academic and social functioning. Such students with SAD can skip classes, group work, or extra-curricular activities and this can result into isolation and lack of self-esteem. The identification of SAD as an offline and online phenomenon is vital to comprehend the effects of SAD in the modern digital setting.

3. Social Media and its Relevance to Anxiety

The use of social media involves a continuum of activity, including active (e.g., posting, messaging, commenting) and passive (e.g., scrolling, no action). Verduyn et al. and Nesi et al. discovered that passive usage is more closely linked to negative psychological events like envy, loneliness, and anxiety, whereas active and purposeful use could offer social connection and support [6,7].

Social media has its opportunities and challenges to people who have SAD. On the one hand, it provides users with the ability to communicate without any pressures of face-to-face interaction, which is safer to stay in touch socially. Conversely, characteristics that facilitate visibility (likes, comments, number of followers) may exacerbate the concerns of being judged negatively [4]. Lurking or lurking is also a common behavior by many socially anxious students who would rather lurk and observe than post because they will not get the positive reinforcement to reduce anxiety. This relationship is the two-sidelines of digital communication to anxious people.

Therefore it is important to know the interaction or the inconsistency between the use of social media and social anxiety tendencies. This difference between the active and passive engagement assists in understanding why some students feel comfortable and belong online whereas others feel threatened and secluded.

4. Mechanisms Linking Social Media and SAD

There are a number of mechanisms that describe the interaction between the use of social media and Social Anxiety Disorder. These are fear of negative evaluation, social

comparison, online safety behavior, rumination, and interrupted sleep. They are mutually reinforcing, resulting in the maintenance of anxiety and avoidance in college students.

Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) is regarded as the most important characteristic of SAD [8]. Delayed responses, lack of likes, being overlooked in group chats, and similar ambiguous signals can cause severe self-doubt and the feeling of being rejected on social media. Kelly et al. discovered that highly FNE students had lower chances of posting personal updates and were more prone to self-censorship. Such behaviors are similar to offline avoidance patterns avoiding eye contact or speaking in front of the audience, which bolsters anxiety by avoiding exposure to corrective experiences [4].

Another significant process that connects the use of social media and anxiety is Social Comparison. Social media sources such as Instagram and Tik Tok filter the ideal lives of other people, meaning that there is always a chance to compare oneself to others negatively. Liu et al. showed that passive use of Instagram was related to the heightened social comparison and to the heightened social anxiety. In the case of college students who are already worried about social acceptance, the constant exposure to the performance of their peers may result in a negative impact on self-esteem and feelings of incompetence. Downward comparisons on the other hand can be a temporary relief though it can also lead to guilt or isolation [9].

Online Safety Behaviors are similar to offline avoidance behaviors. Students with social anxiety may switch themselves off during online classes, edit their content or delete comments with the fear of being criticized. As much as these behaviors alleviate stress in the short run, they preserve avoidance cycles explained in cognitive-behavioral models [3]. (Clark and Wells, 1995). The safety behaviors in digital space ensure that students do not learn such negative outcomes are not as serious as they are expecting.

SAD persons also experience Rumination and Cognitive Distortions. Students can rehearse their actions in their heads after posting or engaging in online interaction and reviewing their possible errors or awkwardness. This after-event negative rumination perpetuates negative self-focus and increases anxiety with time. Social media networks, which leave a trace of interaction visible (e.g. comment threads, views of stories), can additionally fuel this behavior by enabling users to review and self-criticize repeatedly.

Another mechanism that links social media to anxiety is Sleep Disruption. Late-night scrolling subjects the users to stimulating content and blue light, which postpones sleep and decreases the quality of rest. The use of social media aids during the night is associated with sleep disturbances

and anxiety symptoms. The latter students who have SAD as a preexisting condition might be particularly susceptible to nocturnal online activity as a way of avoidance which also disrupted circadian rhythms and emotional regulation [10].

The empirical evidence of a two-way relationship of social anxiety and social media use is supported. A meta-analysis conducted by Wu et al. (2024) showed that the higher the levels of social anxiety, the more probable it is that a person will be problematic or compulsive in the use of social media, especially passive consumption. In line with this result, longitudinal studies by Shannon et al. (2024) indicated that initial social anxiety was positively correlated with augmented social media dependence, whereas excess social media use, in turn, was viewed as a precursor to augmented anxiety symptoms. These results combined indicate a positive feedback loop: social anxiety encourages people to find online space as a supposedly safer option, but further and further use, in particular, passive use, increases anxiety via social comparison and fear of negative evaluation and sleep disturbance.

This relationship is also influenced by moderating Factors. Problematic use is more prone to loneliness, low self-esteem and insecure attachment styles. According to Ding et al., social anxiety mediated the relationship between social media addiction and attachment insecurity [13]. Likewise, sleep disturbance is another secondary mediator, which connects digital habits to emotional deregulation [10]. There is also a chance that gender and cultural background can also be the reason since some studies indicate that women and international students have more emotional effects on online evaluation.

Overall, these processes demonstrate the manner in which the social media space recreates and enhances the same cognitive and behavioral schema that perpetuate SAD in real life. The mechanisms will aid the clinicians and educators to make specific intervention to ensure that the students have a healthy digital life.

5. Evidence from Research Studies

The available empirical research studies investigating the association between social media and social anxiety disorder (SAD) among college students rely mostly on cross-sectional, longitudinal, and meta-analysis studies. In these research designs, a more or less uniform correlation of increased levels of social anxiety with problematic social media use has been observed but the effects and their directions depend on the methodology. Cross-sectional studies always show a positive relation between the symptoms of social anxiety and problematic patterns of using social media. As an illustration, Wu et al. revealed that more socially anxious people were prone to excessive

social media practices or maladaptive practices, especially passive social media consumption, which is browsing without communicating [11]. The same results can be found in the research projects which concentrated on fear of negative evaluation, social comparison, and avoidance behaviors in the online environment, where social and anxious students are likely to be attracted to the social media setting and be simultaneously exposed to distress. The longitudinal studies are more effective in terms of evidence as to whether this relationship has changed over time. Shannon et al. discovered that the prediction of baseline problematic social media use in predicting the escalation of problematic social media use over time and the prediction of higher problematic use of social media in escalating anxiety symptoms in later assessments [12]. These results confirm the presence of a bidirectional relationship which means that the use of social media, both as a coping mechanism in social anxiety and as a maintaining factor that increases the intensity of anxiety symptoms in the long run. These findings are further supported by meta-analytic evidence. The meta-analysis by Wu et al. summarized outcomes of various research studies and reached the conclusion that social anxiety is a critical risk factor of problematic use of social media, in particular, passive engagement, but not interactive engagement [11]. Notably, also in this review, the variability across studies was identified as rather high, which implies that an individual difference, including self-esteem, attachment insecurity, and emotion regulation, can moderate the effects observed. Certain limitations exist in the existing literature even though the associations are consistent. Several researches use self-reported information and are prone to response bias or biased interpretation of usage trends. Also, cross-sectional designs do not allow causal inference and not many studies use objective measures like digital use records or experimental manipulation. These gaps indicate that future studies that use mixed-methods methods and experimental designs are necessary to elucidate causal processes and situational variables that have an impact on the correlation between using social media and social anxiety.

6. Discussion and Suggestions

College years are a stage where people are developing and socially exploring. Manipulative use of social media may also influence the deterrence of participation in classes, networking, and relationship building by SAD. Lazy students are also not fond of posting on online platforms, so that they do not engage in academic or social activities. Nevertheless, social media is not bad in nature. It can be applied positively and deliberately, which results in the creation of social support and belonging. The results

of Aubry et al. indicated that loneliness and depressive symptoms might be decreased by supportive online communication [14]. Therefore, the strategy of working with social media should not be aimed at eradicating social media but rather encouraging healthy consumption.

The evidence reviewed indicates that there is a two-way relationship between SAD and social media. The social media may be used to assist students who have social anxiety to cope with social interactions, but too much or passive use of the media tends to aggravate the symptoms. Longitudinal and experimental designs should be used in the future so as to prove causality and include objective data like digital usage logs.

The social media behaviors should be included in the treatment plans by cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) that enables the students to acknowledge their digital safety behaviors and train them with exposure by posting content gradually and interacting. To normalize online anxieties and minimize evaluative pressures online, universities ought to provide digital well-being training sessions and peer support groups in digital classrooms.

Finally, awareness, and balanced usage over demonizing of social media will enable students to use the tools to their advantage by utilizing them both in a way that promotes their studies and mental well-being.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a complicated reciprocal relationship between college students' usage of social media and their prevalence of social anxiety disorder (SAD). Digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat can provide avenues for academic collaboration, social connection, and self-expression, but they can exacerbate social anxiety-sustaining mechanisms like rumination, social comparison, and fear of being negatively evaluated. An atmosphere where self-worth is externally validated is produced by the continual exposure to evaluative indicators, such as likes, comments, and follower counts, which reinforces avoidance and anxiety behaviors. This dual character is supported by data from cross-sectional and longitudinal research, which suggest that social media may work as a risk factor that prolongs anxiety symptoms over time as well as a coping mechanism.

Mental health professionals and educators should incorporate digital well-being techniques and social media literacy into college population treatments to address these issues. Online exposure activities can be included into cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to assist pupils progressively face their evaluative anxieties in digital environments. Additionally, universities want to encourage balanced participation by promoting helpful and active online interactions as opposed to idle skimming. In the

end, encouraging awareness, mindfulness, and ethical use of social media can turn these platforms into instruments that improve kids' resilience, social confidence, and general mental health rather than demonizing them.

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