Social Media Usage, Personality, and Wellbeing in College Students

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Recent research into the psychological effects of social networking has been limited in scope and produced conflicting results. Some studies suggest that social media site (SMS) usage can have beneficial effects, such as increased social connectedness and fewer feelings of loneliness (Allen et al., 2014; Pittman & Reich, 2016). Other researchers have claimed that SMS can have harmful effects such as increased depressive symptoms, decreases in subjective wellbeing, and feelings of envy toward peers (Chou & Edge, 2012; Kross et al., 2013; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). These conflicting results point to a need for more nuanced examination of SMS use (Feinstein et al., 2013). For example, many studies focus heavily on time spent on social media and number of friends, but few address the question of whether different types of social media behavior (i.e., scrolling, posting, direct messaging) have differential effects on wellbeing. Furthermore, the vast majority of studies focus exclusively on Facebook. However, Facebook popularity among youth is decreasing as the popularity of platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat rise. This calls for an examination of all social media platforms as they relate to psychological consequences.

Previous research has also failed to consider the possibility that SMS usage may have different effects on different persons. Because personality characteristics have been shown to play a role in how people react to things around them, especially in terms of how they compare themselves to peers (Olsen & Evans, 1999). I wished to explore how personality influences the type and intensity of social media usage, and also how personality influences the way social media usage affects wellbeing. My ultimate goal is to investigate this association in adolescents, so I worked this summer on testing my measures on a sample of college students, creating a questionnaire regarding social media usage and relating SMS patterns to Big Five personality characteristics and depressive symptoms.

My initial analysis suggested there were three main subtypes of SMS usage: self-presentation (posting statuses, pictures, articles), social interaction (commenting, liking, sending direct messages), and passive viewing (scrolling). In terms of personality characteristics, high levels of extraversion were associated with more self-presentation behavior, as predicted. Personality (specifically, high neuroticism, low agreeableness, and low extraversion) proved to be the strongest predictor of depression, but low amounts of SMS self-presentation predicted depression over and above the effect of personality. Furthermore, a significant interaction was obtained which suggested that the detrimental effect of low self-presentation was most pronounced among those low in openness to experience. Given that those low in openness to experience tend to be more traditional and cautious, it could be the case that their unwillingness to present themselves and their thoughts on social media influences depressive symptoms. I hope to use the data from this study to test younger age groups as part of my honors project this upcoming school year. By looking at adolescents as well as college students, I hope to be able to see developmental effects of social media usage and its impact on wellbeing.

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References: