THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON MENTAL HEALTH

by

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research project to my parents, John and Penny Pond, who have provided me with unwavering support throughout all of the twists and turns that my life has taken leading me to this moment. Growing up, I watched as my parents worked tirelessly to provide my brother and me an amazing life, sacrificing so that we never had to do without. My parents embodied leading by example, displaying what God-fearing and hardworking individuals endure in the pursuit of their goals. They instilled in me values and morals, such as work ethic, honesty, dedication. In addition, they also taught me to trust in God to lead me down the path that He has chosen for me knowing that He will provide me with all of the tools necessary to succeed. Never once have my parents doubted my ability to succeed in life, and without their steadfast support, I would not be the woman and scholar that I am today. They alone have remained the one constant through my pursuit of my education and goals. I am so grateful to them for having faith in me and I hope I have made them proud, that would be the truest measure of success.

Acknowledgments

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Dr. Dodson, I appreciate all that you have done in your efforts to assist me with completing this project. Your guidance over the last few semesters has been invaluable to my education and my understanding of criminology. The way you carry yourself inside the classroom and your willingness to dedicate yourself to your students has inspired me to do the same in the future. Thank you for your respect and your time it did not go unnoticed.

ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON MENTAL HEALTH

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University of Houston Clear Lake, 2018

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Throughout my career as a Houston Police officer, I have responded to numerous calls for service where a complainant was threatened, harassed, impersonated, or otherwise victimized. Many of these calls had a common denominator – social media. Whether social media was the method in which the complainant was contacted, or the tool used to victimize, its role was profound. I wanted to know why people were using social media as a weapon just as much as I wanted to know why many victims seemed incapable of putting their phones down, even for just a few minutes while talking to the police. I decided to focus this research project on the effect that social media usage is having on its users. More specifically, the connection, if one should exist, between social media use and mental illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, as well as the connection to violent and deviant behaviors. Current research suggests there is a correlation between social media use and deteriorated mental health status. Research also has found that violent and deviant behavior is becoming more prevalent online because of the anonymity of the perpetrator. This project adds to the literature by examining the relationship between social media use and mental health.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the Scope of Social Media and Technology Use

The use of social media networking sites, photo sharing applications, and interactive online platforms have exploded in popularity in the United States over the last decade. With the advancement of technology, users can access popular social media applications virtually 24 hours a day, seven days a week. These sites allow users to express their thoughts, share their feelings, post pictures, post status updates, and stay connected with friends and family across the world. According to Facebook, the popular social media-networking site averages 1.47 billion daily users as of 2018 (Facebook Newsroom, 2018). Additionally, Gramlich (2018, para. 2) found that two-thirds (68%) of U.S. adults use Facebook. Instagram, a popular photo sharing application, which is also owned by Facebook, is used by approximately 35% of all U.S. adults (Gramlich, 2018).

With such staggering numbers, our tech-savvy generation of users stays connected to a multitude of social media platforms on a daily or minute-to-minute basis. Politicians, police chiefs, and the President of the United States use social media to disseminate important emergency information, and discuss legislative and political issues on the local, state, and federal level. Legislatures and politicians often discuss hotly debated topics, such as healthcare and immigration via social media before they make statements to traditional news media outlets.

A feature known as live-streaming allows users to post live video of themselves directly to their Facebook account. Users use the live-stream feature to broadcast themselves as they commit violent crimes, including sexual assault, murder, and even suicides. The realization that these individuals have followers who watch these crimes unfolding in real time is disturbing. Even more egregious is the fact viewers do not

contact authorities despite watching the crime as it occurs (see e.g., Dreyfuss, 2017; McPhate, 2016; Mezzofiore, 2017).

Although social media is beneficial for allowing individuals to stay connected to friends and family, the effect it has on one's mental health remains unclear. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), depression rates rose nearly 18% from 2005 to 2015 and affected nearly 300 million people, which coincided with the increase in popularity of social media. Though correlation alone does not necessarily demonstrate that social media and mental illness are related, it does allow for a more thorough look into the connection, if any, between them. This research project examines the literature on the use of social media and its effects on the mental health of its users, both positive and negative. This research project examines varying aspects of mental health, such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Additionally, this project includes a discussion of current trends in the social media community, including the prevalence of violent and deviant behaviors being carried out via social media.

CHAPTER II:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Low Self-Esteem and Cyberbullying

The empirical literature has produced mixed results regarding the effects of social media use on mental health. Research conducted by Baruth (2014) found social media had a positive effect on interpersonal connections and relationships in face-to-face situations. In addition, she found the use of social media as a networking platform bolstered the ability to make connections and form relationships in the real world. Conversely, Baruth (2014, p. 86) noted that social media has many known risk factors such as, depression, social rejection, online bullying, and even access to damaging and inappropriate material, which all had the ability to negatively affect the mental health of the users. Additionally, the more time users spent on social media, the more likely they were to have lower levels of self-esteem. Subsequently, users who had lower self-esteem were at an increased risk for developing symptoms related to depression because the relationships they were creating on social media were not of great quality or value (Baruth, 2014, p. 86).

Baruth (2014, p. 86) argued cyberbullying placed social media users at risk for psychological and physical trauma. Teens and adolescents face bullying while in school and on the playground, but social media platforms allow bullies to continue to victimize others. Now, because of the explosion of social media use, the current generation of teens and adolescents do not receive a reprieve from bullying. Individuals are now able to communicate via various social media outlets even after school hours, allowing bullies to continue the harassment of their victims virtually.

The image of a bully is no longer limited to the schoolyard, and anyone can be a bully online. Traditional avenues for resolution are not available to the younger social

media using generation and bullying often goes unnoticed or unaddressed. The days of standing up to a bully on the playground or in the cafeteria are over. Many of the social media cyberbullies torment other users anonymously, hiding behind fake profiles and screen names, which can increase the victim's level of fear and affect their mental health.

<div align="center">**Anxiety and the Fear of Missing Out**</div>

Several studies examine the phenomenon known as fear of missing out (FOMO). The findings of these studies point to the presence of social media use in human relationships, and how it gives users the ability to monitor validation and inclusion. For instance, if users are on social media and they observe their friends at a party, one to which they are not invited to, this can create feelings of anxiety and isolation. In addition, situations like this create doubt and lead people to question if their peers no longer like them. Social media users are afraid of social exclusion, but also fear they will miss the social media activity of their friends. This leads them to check continually for posts and tweets (Whitbourne, 2017).

Research by Przybylski (2013) shows social media users experience FOMO when they are not included in something as simple as an inside joke. Furthermore, when others are already anxious about whether they are being included they tend to constantly check social media platforms, which lowers their ability to focus on other involvements, such as work, the classroom, or simply carrying on conversations with another person face-to-face. This results in an overall negative effect on mental health, as work or school performance decreases. Not only does this behavior affect attention spans but it may cause social media users to face certain physical risks, including checking social media while driving (Whitbourne, 2017).

Self-harm and Addiction

Studies have shown that frequent internet use leads to higher rates of self-harm and addiction. For example, one study using a secondary data analysis indicated the internet had numerous outlets for self-help and addiction recovery, but had more outlets that normalized self-harm and addiction (Marchant, Hawton, Stewart, Montgomery, Singaravelu, Lloyd, & John, 2017). In addition, persons who visited self-harm websites and blogs were more likely to have issues with internet addiction overall. In the seven studies reviewed, a positive correlation was identified between internet addiction and self-harm. Unfortunately, these blogs and social media sites facilitate suicide clusters; that is, a chain reaction of suicides among social media and blog users when one member commits suicide or an act of self-harm (Marchant et al., 2017).

Four studies reviewed in the same secondary analysis, targeted social media specifically, three of which found that social media had a negative effect on mental health, in relation to self-harm. The fourth study had mixed findings. Three of the studies indicated young people turned to social media and sent posts or messages before being checked in to emergency rooms for self-harm, instead of attempting to notify a responsible adult. In open self-harm Facebook groups, self-harm/suicide was often glorified and supported by members of the group. However, many users who had suicidal ideations were able to find self-help and support groups on social media and the internet as well. There is often a stigma regarding a mental health diagnosis, which makes it less likely that those who need help will get it. In lieu of discussing their concerns with their families, the internet and social media provides a safe avenue and helpful tool to develop a support group to seek better mental health, but, overall, this is not typical (Marchant et al., 2017).

Depression and Effects on Personality

Depression rates in the United States have soared over the last few decades. Studies indicate there is a link between the patient's use of social media and the onset or worsening of depressive symptoms. Lin et al. (2016) found the onset of depression began during pivotal times of self-development in early adulthood. The research also found a link between social media use and depression in young adults. The use of social media has increased among this population, who are at critical stages of developmental, including the establishment of one's identity and social norms (Lin et al., 2016). Furthermore, the study goes on to state that nearly 90% of young adults in the United States use social media and most access a social media site at least once a day.

It is important to note that Lin et al.'s (2016) study unequivocally suggested that higher depression rates are directly related to frequent use of social media. Participants in the highest quartile of total time per day had significantly greater odds of depression (Lin et al., 2016). Interestingly, the group most at risk for social media related depression were between the ages of 27 and 32 years old.

Social media is related to users' personality traits. Research suggested the more outgoing a person is; the more likely they are to use social media platforms. However, research by Correa et al. (2013) found that instant messaging applications, such as Facebook Messenger are more popular among neurotic individuals and those who are emotionally unstable because they find it easier to communicate with other online in comparison to face-to-face interactions. Additionally, Correa et al. (2013) found a negative association between social media use and the user's emotional stability. The research suggested users who had lower levels of emotional stability were more dependent on the use of social media applications compared to users who had greater levels of emotional stability. Furthermore, anxious and worrisome individuals tend to use

social media more frequently than those who are emotionally stable (Correa et al., 2013). Although Correa et al. (2013) found a link between social media use and user personality traits, the major finding is that increased social media use is related to neuroticism or emotional instability. The findings suggested that users suffering from higher levels of anxiousness or nervousness used these services to seek support and company, further noting that neuroticism was related to loneliness (Correa et al., 2013).

Research conducted by De Choudry et al. (2013) asserted that depression predicted the way social media users express themselves on social media applications. De Choudry et al. (2013) focused their research on analyzing the linguistics and patterns of expression by identifying cues in the way in which users communicated on social media posts that were indicative of depression and anxiety. Their research found that the emotion and language used in social media postings indicated feelings of worthlessness, guilt, helplessness, and self-hatred that characterize major depression (De Choudry et al., 2013). Of their 476 respondents, they determined that 171 individuals responded positively for depression. In addition, the researchers examined twelve months of the respondents Twitter posts that immediately preceded the reported onset of depression. Out of these Twitter posts, De Choudry et al. (2013) determined individuals with depression show lowered social activity, greater negative emotion, high self-attentional focus, increased relational and medicinal concerns, and heightened expression of religious thoughts. Furthermore, their study demonstrated a pattern of social media use among depressed individuals by identifying behavioral patterns, such as a pronounced social media presence at night rather than during the day.

Social Media and Criminal Activity

Live-Streaming Crime

A new trend has developed in which Facebook users' live-stream crime. Violent criminal acts have been live-streamed on Facebook over the last year, including sexual assaults, hate crimes, and murders (see e.g., Dreyfuss, 2017; Mezzofiore, 2017). This trend is so new that little research has been conducted on it; however, the acts have been discussed in the mainstream news and in online psychology journals.

Acts of violence being broadcast live on Facebook by those who are perpetrating the crimes and amassing dozens, sometimes thousands, of viewers raises serious questions as it relates to the mental health status of the users. The desire to broadcast oneself committing violent crimes calls into the question the mental health of the individual responsible for the post, but also the mental health of all who watch the live-stream and yet do not report the incident to the authorities.

Ali (2017) documented the details of a 15-year-old girl in Chicago, brutally raped by multiple men while the assailants live-streamed themselves on their Facebook pages to their friends and followers. According to Ali (2017), the video reportedly garnered dozens of viewers who watched as the crime occurred and not one of the nearly 40 individual viewers called the police. Another incident in Chicago showed a mentally disabled young man being beaten and tortured as he cowered in the corner of a room while four assailants assaulted him and slashed at him with knives. This live video garnered thousands of views and lasted for nearly a half hour. Martocci (2017, para. 4) stated that one assailant was so devoid of empathy for the victim that she whined on camera about not having much of a digital audience. This incident, even with nearly 16 thousand online viewers, was not reported to the police.

Accidental shootings have been broadcasted on the Facebook Live feature. Individuals have live-streamed themselves handling weapons and broadcasted to those viewing the moment they accidentally pulled the trigger. An incident in Houston, Texas in early 2018 caused many to speculate whether a live-streamed Facebook video seen by thousands of a man being shot was truly an accident (Embrey-Dennis, 2018). The Facebook Live video showed a young woman sitting in the driver's seat of an SUV with a male in the passenger seat. The woman picked up a pistol from the center console and waved the weapon at the camera while taunting the viewers. The woman is then seen racking the slide of the weapon, effectively loading the weapon, and pointing the gun at the head of the male sitting next to her. The male visibly caught off guard, attempted to stop the woman from pointing the gun in his direction. The woman discharged the gun and blood poured out of a head wound inflicted on the male in the passenger's seat. The woman fled the scene, leaving the male to die, never calling the police for help. The woman was charged, and she subsequently turned herself in. She maintained the shooting was accidental and that she never intended to harm the male.

Premeditated or accidental, this new trend of committing violent acts to gain fame, followers, viewers, and media attention is cause for concern. Are mental health issues an explanation for individuals who feel the need to hurt others while live audiences watch? Has the monotony of posting status updates and uploading pictures caused users to act in ways that are shocking and eye-catching? In addition, what is causing people to watch these live-streaming acts of crime and not report the incident to the police? Martocci (2017) suggested that the viewers possibly suffer from what is known as the bystander effect, which she explains is when people, passively stand by because they believed that someone else had already made the call, done the right thing. The failure for such acts to be reported is disconcerting considering the ease and anonymity with which

one may report in today's technologically advanced society. Additionally, Martocci (2017) suggested that online disinhibition effect could partially explain the lack of reaction we have seen to such violence. The online disinhibition effect describes the loosening of inhibitions usually present in face-to-face interactions…a desensitization to online violence.

Social Media Persona

Patton, Eschmann, and Butler (2013) studied an emerging phenomenon, of internet behavior in which individuals that are associated with gangs or neighborhood factions used social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to incite dares, trade insults, or make threats of violence, which may result in homicide or victimization. Patton et al. (2013) coined this online social media persona as internet banging and argue that the presence of this online activity is because of the widespread use and increased the availability of social media sites to users across all demographics. Additionally, Patton et al. (2013) suggested that social media outlets were new avenues for group gatherings and interactions, a normal human desire seen before the age of the internet. However, they cited the negative consequences of a prolonged online presence, when online users perceived themselves to be free of social norms, their activities were no longer bound by society's standards (Patton et al., 2013), which can be explained, in part, by the anonymity the internet provided.

Furthermore, Patton et al. (2013) found that the phenomenon of internet banging bridged the gap between mere cyberbullying and real-life aggressive behavior. Generally, cyberbullying is marked by the distinct lack of real-world perpetrators, the anonymity of the attacker can cause the victim distress. Patton et al. (2013) also found that one might suggest that the worlds [of cyberbullying and real-life violence] are not connected, but that the trends the result of increased internet access among individuals who would have

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engaged with violent behavior anyway. Additionally, social media is a tool for gang members to seek, maintain, and promote their street credibility by posting about their violence, drug deals, and generally deviant behavior (Patton et al., 2013).

Patton et al. (2013) claimed social media outlets are the primary means through which individuals displayed the extent to which they 'keep it real.' The theory of adaptive structuration suggests social media evolved from its intended purpose to the needs/desires of the users. This evolution resulted in social media worlds becoming the place for one's street credibility to be tried and tested. Patton et al. (2013, p. A58) note that just a few years ago, "internet gangsters were seen as a joke…today, the internet banging phenomenon has convinced many that social media is really where gangsters live."

Social Media Related Crime and Arrest Data

Official research showing an increase in arrests or documented crimes committed by way of police reports that have a nexus to social media is sparse in the United States. However, the United Kingdom is vigilant in prosecuting those who use social media sites as a tool to commit a crime. In an article published in *The Daily Mail*, Jack Doyle (2012, para. 1) asserts a crime linked to Facebook is reported to police every 40 minutes. His article documents the findings of police reports and arrest data linked to Facebook. His research also indicates that Facebook use leads to an array of crimes, both violent and non-violent. Additionally, Doyle (2012) finds in some cases, arguments conducted on the site lead to 'real world violence. Another article in 2012 by *The Guardian*, a U.K. based online news website, states that crime reports involving Twitter and Facebook increased violent incidents by almost 800% in four years.

In 2012, almost 700 individuals were arrested and charged with various crimes all stemming from the use of Facebook or Twitter (*The Daily Mail*, 2012). These arrests and

subsequent convictions were the result of 29 police departments across the United Kingdom. The crimes included harassment, fraud, stalking, and a variety of sexual offenses (*The Daily Mail*, 2012). Although data suggested that arrest rates for offenses stemming from the use of social media have grown significantly over the last decade, police are responding to it. For example, Doyle (2012) stated that police departments categorized the incidents into two separate categories: 1) crimes that would have been committed regardless of the availability of social media sites, and 2) crimes that were committed solely because of the availability of social media sites. Doyle (2012, para. 14) quoted a detective interviewed during his research who stated, "…there is nothing intrinsically dangerous or criminal about Facebook, but…it needs to be treated with respect because of the dangers that can be associated with its use."

Solving Crimes Through Social Media

Social media and its link to the criminal justice system is not all bad. Research suggests that social media has been used as an effective tool for gathering evidence, solving crimes, and helping victims. Kelly (2012) documents a federal judges ruling that a murder suspects legitimate expectation of privacy ends when he disseminates posts to his 'friends' because those 'friends' were free to use the information however they wanted. In this particular case, the suspect posted incriminating photos and statuses viewable to his friends on Facebook and his friends subsequently shared them with law enforcement. Additionally, police departments across the nation have begun to utilize officers in undercover capacities online. For example, Patton et al. (2013) notes some metropolitan police departments, specifically gang violence units, have increased their online presence in response to the increase in the gang presence on social media. Kelly (2012) states that though creating fake Facebook profiles to befriend suspects is a common police tool to gather information, the practice is a controversial approach to

getting information from social networks. Officers and investigators with other agencies can use whatever information they find as evidence against potential suspects. Additionally, police departments can submit official requests, to obtain data from social media sites for individuals and, if a search warrant follows the request signed by a judge, social media sites are required to turn over all relevant information. Kelly (2012) assert that 1,221 federal, state, and local law enforcement use social media to gather intelligence during investigations.

CHAPTER III:

METHODS

Procedure

For this study, an online research survey was used. This method allowed for ease of distribution and to reach a larger sample. A link to the online survey was released via social media, email, and text messages.

Sample

There were 180 responses submitted via SurveyMonkey. Eight of the surveys were incomplete; therefore, they were not usable for the analysis. The final non-random sample consists of 172 surveys. The majority of the sample respondents were as follows; 121 females (70%), White (58%), heterosexual (90%), and most respondents reported they were in a relationship (69%). The major limitation of a non-random, convenience sample is it does not allow for the generalizability of the findings. However, the current research project is exploratory and represents an important first step to understanding mental health, self-esteem, and deviance as it relates to social media use.

Variables

Independent Variables

For data collection purposes, social media and its various platforms, i.e., Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter serves as independent variables. Accessing social media and frequency of media usage also is included.

Dependent Variables

Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem are included in the analyses. In addition, deviant behaviors such as self-harm, threatening speech, and physical violence serve as dependent variables.

Hypotheses

For the current study, five hypotheses are tested. They include:

H1: An inability to access social media platforms causes users to have increased anxiety.

H2: The frequency of a user's social media access leads to lower self-esteem.

H3: Social media leads to user's feeling insecure about their appearance.

H4: Receiving threatening messages via social media leads to an increase in self-harm.

H5: Users who receive threatening messages via social media are more likely to consider physically harming the sender.
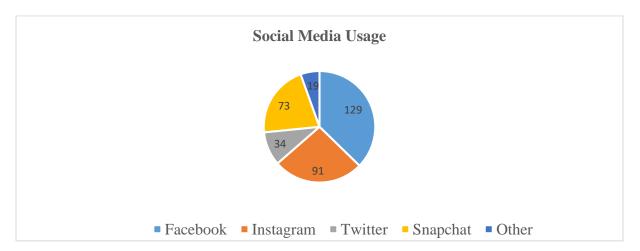
CHAPTER IV:

FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics

The current study presents a series of descriptive statistics regarding media platforms, media usage, and cell phone habits. The descriptive analyses also includes a presentation of the data as it relates to social media user's feelings about their physical appearance, whether they have perpetrated or been the victims of threatening behavior on social media platforms, and the effects of social media on personal relationships, mood, and self-esteem.

According to respondents, Facebook was the most often used social media platform, with 129 respondents selecting Facebook as a platform they use daily. Instagram was the next most often used platform, with 91 respondents selecting Instagram as a platform they use daily. A majority of respondents (54.97%) state that they posted or shared on their individual and respective social media accounts as often as multiple times a day, once a day, and even once a week.

Figure 1. Social Media Usage

Respondents were asked if they could go an entire day without their cellphone to which the majority responded they could. However, of the 43.02% respondents who admitted that they could not go an entire day without their cell phones, 67.41% reported feelings of stress or anxiety after as little as three hours without their cellphones.
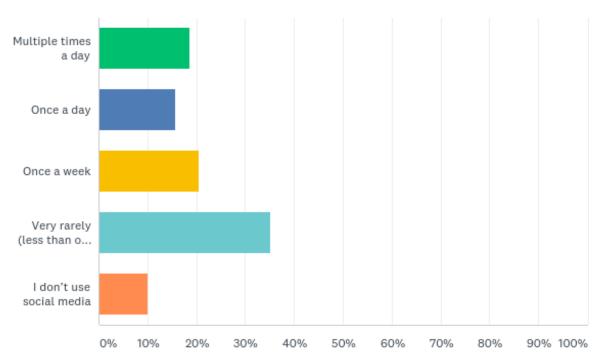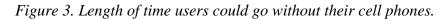
Figure 2. Frequency of Posting/Sharing on Social Media

Respondents were asked how confident they felt about their physical appearance. The majority, (80.85%) responded that they felt confident or extremely confident. However, when asked if the respondents had ever felt insecure about their physical appearance after viewing posts and photos on social media, 56.98% responded that yes, they had felt insecure about their appearance because of what they were seeing on social media.

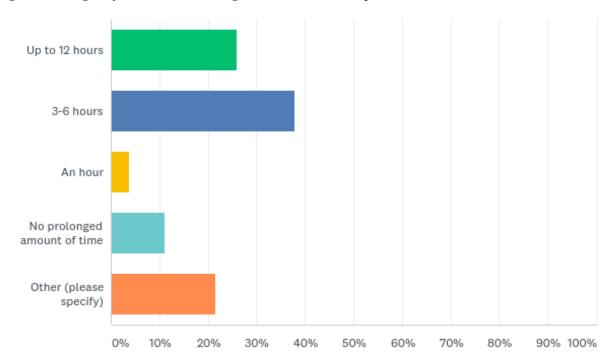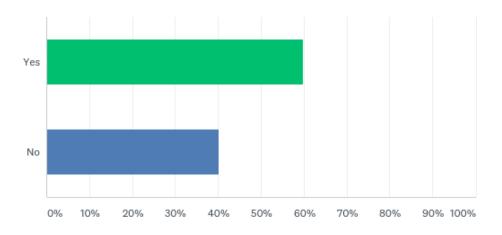*Figure 3. Length of time users could go without their cell phones.*

Figure 4. Feelings of Insecurity about Physical Appearance after Using Social Media

Respondents were asked whether they believed that social media use can cause lower self-esteem. The majority of respondents (92, 55.08%) stated that they disagreed.

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However, 75 respondents (44.91%) stated they agreed that social media use does cause lower self-esteem.

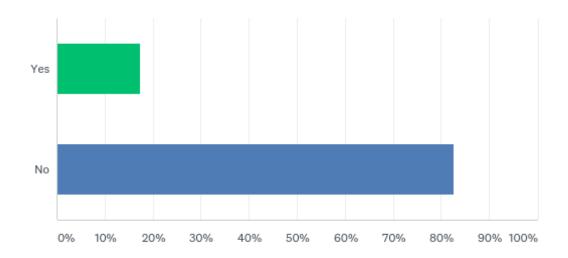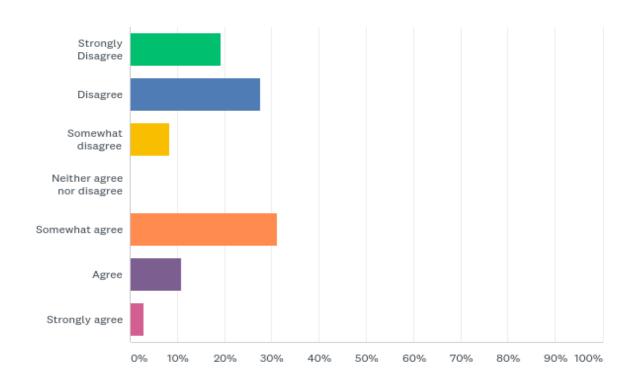*Figure 5. Receiving Threatening Messages via Social Media*

Figure 6. Does Social Media cause Lower Self-Esteem

Respondents were asked whether a lack of feedback to the posts and photos they share on social media, such as likes on their pictures, retweets to their Twitter posts, and shares/comments on their Facebook posts has ever affected their mood. The findings showed 29.07% of respondents responded that their mood has been affected by a lack of feedback received on their various posts. Conversely, 70.93% of respondents reported that a lack of feedback has not influenced their mood (see also Figures 8 and 9).

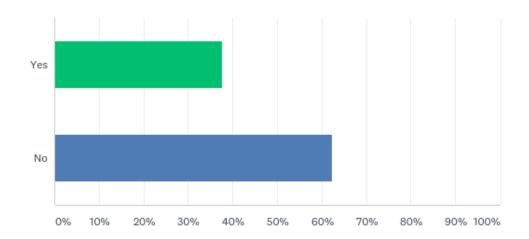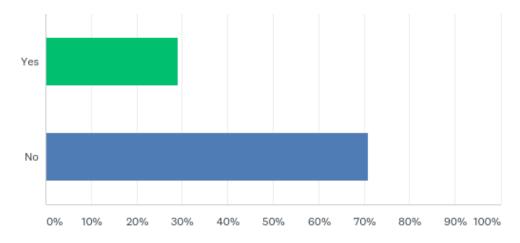*Figure 7. Has Social Media ever Negatively Affected a Personal Relationship?*

Figure 8. Lack of Feedback on Photos Affecting Mood

Figure 9. Does Social Media Negatively Affect Mental Health?

Hypothesis Testing

Bivariate Analysis

A series of bivariate correlations were performed to determine the relationship between several independent and dependent variables. The analyses were conducted respective to each individual hypothesis and significant relationships were reported. Bivariate correlation indicates the strength and direction of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Correlation is the appropriate analysis because the variables are measured at the ordinal level.

Hypothesis 1

H_1: An inability to access social media platforms causes users to have increased anxiety.

The results indicate that the inability to access social media platforms is significantly and negatively related ($r = -.32$, $p = .000$) to increased anxiety, although the relationship is weak. In other words, a user's inability to access social media increases their anxiety.

Hypothesis 2

H$_2$: The frequency of a user's access to social media leads to lower self-esteem.

The results indicate that the more a user posts on social media is significantly and negatively related (r = -.39, p = .000) to lower self-esteem and the relationship is moderate. In other words, a user's frequent social media use lowers their self-esteem.

Hypothesis 3

H$_3$: Social media leads to user's feeling insecure about their appearance.

The results indicate that the more a user posts on social media is significantly and positively related (r = .18, p = .024) to feeling insecure about their personal appearance and the relationship is weak. In other words, a user's frequent social media posts lead users to feel insecure about their personal appearance.

Hypothesis 4

H$_4$: Receiving threatening messages via social media leads to an increase in self-harm.

The results indicate that if a user received a threatening message on social media, they are more likely to consider self-harm. The relationship is significantly and positively related (r = .27, p = .002) to committing acts of self-harm in response to threatening messages on social media.

Hypothesis 5

H$_5$: Users who receive threatening messages via social media are more likely to consider physically harming the sender.

The results indicate that when a user receives a threatening message via social media, they are more likely to consider physically harming the sender of the message. The relationship is significantly and positively related (r = .36, p = .000) to feeling a desire to physically harm someone in response to receiving a threatening message.

CHAPTER V:

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Findings from the current research show a number of significant correlations to the use of social media and the presence of mental health related issues and deviant behavior which supports and adds to the current literature available on the topic.

A bivariate correlation test was conducted to determine whether a user's inability to check their various social media accounts led to an increase in anxiety levels and concluded that a significant relationship does exist between the two variables. The findings of the test reflect current research on the phenomenon of FOMO conducted by Whitbourne (2017). Specifically, Whitbourne found that users frequently check social media out of fear that they will miss out on the social media activity of their friends if they do not keep constantly checking for posts and tweets. Although Whitbourne's (2017) study examines the relationship between social media and anxiety from a different angle the results of the present study are similar. That is, increased social media use is related to increased anxiety. Additionally, the *Oxford Dictionary* (2018, para. 1) defines FOMO as, anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on social media. One can, therefore, conclude that if a user constantly feels the need to check their social media accounts to ensure they are not missing out–then the inability to check their social media accounts for an extended amount of time will lead to an increase in feelings of anxiety, which was a tested and confirmed in the current study.

The findings of this research project also support the research findings of Baruth (2014). Specifically, a bivariate correlation test showed that the more time a user spent on social media results in lower the self-esteem. Baruth (2014) documented the same findings in her research, indicating the more time users spent on social media, the more

likely they were to have lower levels of self-esteem. Additionally, Woods and Scott (2016) in a study conducted on 467 adolescents in the United Kingdom echoed the results found by Baruth (2014) and the current research study. That is, Woods and Scott (2016) found that greater emotional investment in social media was associated with lower self-esteem and suggested that adolescents who feel a strong emotional connection to social media sites are more at risk. The correlation between the current research study and the findings of already published literature on the topic lends support to the hypothesis and overall findings.

The current study examined whether a user's presence on social media had any effect on the user's feelings about their personal appearance, specifically if social media caused them to feel insecure about their appearance. Woods et al. (2016) asserts that social media users' experience an abundance of exposure to other users' carefully constructed profiles that emphasize their positive characteristics, thus diminishing adolescents' own feelings of self-worth. Therefore, the research indicates there is a relationship between a feeling of insecurity about one's personal appearance and an increased social media presence. Users are exposed to other user's best qualities including filtered, perfectly angled, pictures. For users who spend an excessive amount of time on various social media platforms, repeatedly seeing other users' posting beautifully captured selfies could lead to the user feeling insecure about their own personal appearance. Woods et al. (2016) describes this as the user's making upward social comparisons, which leads to a decrease in their self-esteem

The link between social media use and deviant behavior such as self-harm was tested via the hypothesis that users who receive threatening messages via social media are more likely to consider harming themselves as a result of the messages. The bivariate correlation showed a significant relationship exists between the two variables. Current

research on the topic supports this hypothesis and suggest a correlation between social media and self-harm exists. For example, Marchant et al. (2017) found that in open self-harm Facebook groups, self-harm/suicide was often glorified and supported by other members in the groups. Additionally, they found that young people turned to social media and sent posts or messages before being checked in to emergency rooms for self-harm.

Although the study conducted by Marchant et al. (2017) does not expressly determine a link between threatening messages and self-harm, the social media link is present in their findings regarding self-harm which supports the hypothesis presented in the current study. However, in a study conducted by Hay et al. (2010, p .138), researchers found that bullying has a consistent, relatively strong association with delinquency, self-harm, and suicidal ideation, but this is especially true for cyberbullying. This finding supports the hypothesis proposed by the current study because cyberbullying is often done via messages sent by anonymous users on social media platforms.

Lastly, a hypothesis was tested to determine if a link between receiving threatening messages via social media could lead to the receiver of the messages resulting in violent or deviant behavior, specifically, by responding with a desire to harm physically the sender. The current study's data found a significant relationship to exist between the two and responses indicated that users who received such messages exhibited a desire to commit physical harm to another. Patton et al. (2013) and their work on the phenomenon of internet banging suggests that violent behavior and social media are correlated due to social media bridging the gap between cyberbullying and real-life aggressive behavior. Although the article by Patton et al. (2013) focuses their study on the presence of gang members online, rather than normal law-abiding citizens, the link between social media and violent behavior has been established.

Additionally, Patton et al. (2014) examined the online presence of gang members and the violence such individuals espoused on social media. The findings indicate where gang members are concerned, examples of violence and crime on social media include but are not limited to…harassing or threatening someone online; attacking someone on the street because of something said online (Patton et al., 2014). Research is scarce regarding the applicability of such an assertion to individuals not immersed in a lifestyle already filled with violence, such as that of a gang member. However, Patton et al. (2014) state that, there may be a directional relationship between online and in-person violence (in which physical violence spurs online relational violence, and vice versa). Therefore, although available research does not explicitly confirm the tested hypothesis in the current study, one can conclude that the correlation between violence and social media use is undeniable, which lends support to the stated hypothesis.

In conclusion, the use of social media applications is widespread and its use is likely to increase. It is important to note that although the focus of this study was to determine the negative effects of social media use on mental health, one cannot discount the many positive aspects of social media across the world. Nevertheless, the potentially dangerous outcomes that widespread use of social media can have on its user's mental health is well documented and deserving of academic concern. The available literature, along with the current study's findings, supports the assertion that anxiety, low self-esteem, and depressive and deviant behaviors are directly related to, and influenced by, individuals' use of various social media platforms. This project sought to find correlations between social media use and negative mental health outcomes. . Going further, research is needed to understand the extent of influence that social media has on generations of individuals as they go through life, and what ramifications such varied effects may have.

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APPENDIX A:

INFORMED CONSENT

You are being asked to participate in the research project described below. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or you may decide to stop your participation at any time. Should you refuse to participate in the study or should you withdraw your consent and stop participation in the study, your decision will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you may be otherwise entitled. You are being asked to read the information below carefully and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether to participate.

> **Title:**   The Negative Effects of Social Media on User's Mental Health
>
> **Student Investigator(s):** Britini Pond and Nicholas Brown
>
> **Faculty Sponsor:** Kimberly Dodson, Ph.D. Criminology

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to determine whether or a not a link exists between the use of social media and its various platforms and mental health issues such as depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety amongst social media users. Furthermore, this research strives to also determine if more pronounced mental health issues are present among social media users who use multiple social media platforms. For this research social media platform refers to interactive applications and websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter.

PROCEDURES

You will be asked to anonymously answer a series of questions immediately following this document. We ask that you answer all the questions to the best of your ability and as truthfully as possible. Once completed please submit your responses, though please be aware you can stop responding to the following questions at any time.

Once your responses have been submitted, they will be analyzed and the data collected to determine and examine the negative effects of social media use on the user's mental health. This data will be collected solely for the purpose of this research project.

EXPECTED DURATION

The total anticipated time commitment will be approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION

During actual Internet communication procedures or accessing an unprotected wireless system, there is a possible risk of breach of confidentiality or data security.

BENEFITS TO THE SUBJECT

There is no direct benefit received from your participation in this study, but your participation will help the investigator(s) better understand the negative impact of social media use on the mental health of social media users.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RECORDS

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. For online participation, your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology being used. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data via the Internet or email. The data collected from the study will be used for educational and publication purposes; however, you will not be identified by name. Internet administration will be set so that computer IP address logs will be deleted. Participant's data for this research project will be maintained and safeguarded on a password-protected database by the Faculty Sponsor for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. After that time, the participant's documentation may be destroyed.

FINANCIAL COMPENSATION

There is no financial compensation to be offered for participation in the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

If you have additional questions during the course of this study about the research or any related problem, you may contact the Faculty Sponsor, Kimberly Dodson Ph.D.at dodsonk@uhcl.edu. You may also contact the Student Investigator, Britini Pond via cellphone 281-753-4388 or email pondb6864@uhcl.edu. Your voluntary participation in this research project is indicated by checking the box that states you have read and understood the above information as well as by completing the survey questions that follow. You may cease your participation at any time by closing your browser. Such participation does not release the investigator(s), institution(s), sponsor(s) or granting agency(ies) from their professional and ethical responsibility to you. We thank you for your time and participation. Your responses will aid on our research and collection of data.

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE (UHCL) COMMITTEE FOR PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS HAS REVIEWED AND APPROVED THIS PROJECT. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UHCL COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (281-283-3015). ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT UHCL ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. (FEDERALWIDE ASSURANCE # FWA00004068)

SURVEY

1) How old are you? _____

2) Are you a male or female?
(Please check which one applies to you)

   □. Male
   □. Female
   □. Other

3) What is your sexual orientation?

    a. Heterosexual

    b. Homosexual

    c. Bisexual

    d. Other

4) What is your relationship status?

    a. Married

    b. Single

    c. Dating

    d. It's complicated

5) What is your ethnicity/race?

    a. Caucasian

    b. Black or African-American

    c. Hispanic/Latino

    d. Asian

    e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

    f. American Indian or Alaska Native

6) Which social media platforms do you use daily? Check all that apply.
   a. Facebook ____
   b. Instagram _____
   c. Twitter ____
   d. Snapchat ____
   e. Kik _____
   f. Other, please list _____

7) About how often do you post/tweet/snap/share on social media?
   a. Multiple times a day
   b. Once a day
   c. One a week
   d. Very rarely (less than once a week)
   e. I don't use social media

8) Could you go an entire day without your cell phone?
   a. Yes
   b. No

9) If no, how long do you think you could go without your cell phone?
   a. Up to 12 hours
   b. 3-6 hours
   c. An hour
   d. No prolonged amount of time

10) Do the inability to check your phone and your various social media outlets cause you to feel stress or anxiety?
   a. Yes
   b. No

11) Does the amount of feedback a post or photo of yours receives affect your mood? (Examples: Likes, shares, and retweets)

    a. Yes

    b. No

12) On the scale below, where 1 is very depressed and 10 is very satisfied, how would you describe your life? **(please circle which number describes you)**

    1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10

13) Generally speaking, I am confident with my physical appearance? (**please circle one**)

14) Has social media ever negatively affected a personal relationship?

    a. Yes

    b. No

15) Have you ever received a threatening message via social media?

    a. Yes

    b. No

  <u>If you answered yes to the previous question,</u> have you ever considered self-harm after receiving such messages?

    a. Yes

    b. No

16) Have you ever considered physically harming someone in retaliation to a message or a post you saw on social media?

    a. Yes

    b. No

17) Have you ever sent a threatening message via social media?

(Example: DM, message, post, tweet)

    a. Yes

    b. No

18) **If you answered yes to the previous question**, which social media platform did you use? (**please check all that apply**)

    a. Facebook _____

    b. Instagram _____

    c. Snapchat _____

    d. Twitter _____

    e. Other, please list _____

19) Have you ever felt insecure about your appearance after viewing posts and pictures of others on social media?

    a. Yes

    b. No

20) Does social media boost your self-esteem? (**Please circle one answer**)

Strongly Agree   Agree   Agree Somewhat   Disagree Somewhat   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

6   5   4   3   2   1

21) Does social media cause you to have lower self-esteem? (**Please circle one answer**)

Strongly Agree   Agree   Agree Somewhat   Disagree Somewhat   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

6   5   4   3   2   1

22) Do you think social media negatively affects user's mental health?

    a. Yes

b. No

23) Have you ever resorted to alcohol or recreational drug use to cope with things you see or witness on social media?

    a. Yes

    b. No

24) Do you feel obligated to post your personal life moments on your social media outlets?

    a. Yes

    b. No