

Depressed From Social Media

Social media use associated with development of depression

Depression is quite prevalent today and the incidence is increasing. Multiple factors contribute to depression but there is growing interest in the association between the use of social media and psychological well-being. More than 90% of young adults use social media on average 2-4 hours daily. This study published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine studied 990 young adult participants between the ages of 18-30 who were not depressed at baseline and found that just under 10% developed depression during the study period. Social media use was strongly and independently associated with the development of depression.



Abstract

- **Introduction:** Previous studies have demonstrated cross-sectional associations between social media use and depression, but their temporal and directional associations have not been reported.
- **Methods:** In 2018, participants aged 18–30 years were recruited in proportion to U.S. Census characteristics, including age, sex, race, education, household income, and geographic region. Participants self-reported social media use on the basis of a list of the top 10 social media networks, which represent >95% of social media use. Depression was assessed using the 9-Item Patient Health Questionnaire. A total of 9 relevant sociodemographic covariates were assessed. All measures were assessed at both baseline and 6-month follow-up.
- **Results:** Among 990 participants who were not depressed at baseline, 95 (9.6%) developed depression by follow-up. In multivariable analyses conducted in 2020 that controlled for all covariates and included survey weights, there was a significant linear association ($p < 0.001$) between baseline social media use and the development of depression for each level of social media use. Compared with those in the lowest quartile, participants in the highest quartile of baseline social media use had significantly increased odds of developing depression (AOR=2.77, 95% CI=1.38, 5.56). However, there was no association between the presence of baseline depression and increasing social media use at follow-up (OR=1.04, 95% CI=0.78, 1.38). Results were robust to all sensitivity analyses.
- **Conclusions:** In a national sample of young adults, baseline social media use was independently associated with the development of depression by follow-up, but baseline depression was not associated with an increase in social media use at follow-up. This pattern suggests temporal associations between social media use and depression, an important criterion for causality.

This study found that social media use was strongly and independently correlated with the development of depression in non-depressed young adults over a 6-month period. There was no association between the presence of depression at baseline and an increase in social media use. This study supports previously noted associations between social media use and depression and found a 3-fold increase in odds of developing depression in social media users. There are three major reasons why social media use may be related to the development of depression. One is that it takes up a lot of time. In this study the average participant consumed around 3 hours of social media daily which is consistent with national estimates. The amount of time spent consuming social media may displace more useful activities such as in-person relationships, exercise, or taking time for reflection. Secondly, social media invites social comparison. Exposure to unattainable images on social media may facilitate depressed feelings. Finally, constant exposure to social media portrayals may interfere with normal developmental neurocognitive processes. The traditional pathways related to social relationship development involve complex interplay among

multiple brain areas and it is possible that features of social media use, such as the rapid cycling of these reward and cognitive processes, may interfere with normal development and instead facilitate the development of conditions such as depression. The data for this study was gathered in 2018, well before the current pandemic and the social unrest that we have seen over the past 12 months. I would imagine the numbers currently would be significantly higher with the increased use of social media accompanied by the loss of school, working from home, and the elimination of many of the opportunities for socialization for young adults.

Temporal Associations Between Social Media Use and Depression. Am J Prev Med 2021 Feb 01;60(2)179-188, BA Primack, A Shensa, JE Sidani, CG Escobar-Viera, MJ Fine