THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT ON FRIENDSHIP AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to test the theory of how social media impacts the relationship of young men and women that compares the time spent on social media to the quality of relationships, both platonic and romantic, for students studying psychology at Clark Atlanta University. Past research on generation Z adults indicated that there has been a great decrease in interest in being in a monogamous relationship. This study is unique because not only does it focus on romantic relationships, but it includes friendships and how social media may play a significant factor. The present study's hypothesis was that student social media activities will impact relationship and friendship quality. The participants were Clark Atlanta students studying psychology. The data collection method was a survey created on Qualtrics. The results indicated that the participants do love their partners; however, desire more. Research shows that they are not necessarily satisfied in their relationships and that it does not meet their original expectations. Within their friendships, they may have disagreements, but they can maintain a healthy relationship as they practice good communication. The majority stated that their most used application is a social media platform with an average of 15 hours a week. The expectations were thus confirmed. Implications of the results for future studies include a longitudinal study on the role of social media in romantic commitments. The results of this study can contribute to the field of psychology and help initiate positive change for young adults and adolescents who are currently consumed by social media and digital realities and ideas they acquire due to their excessive usage.

Keywords

Social Media Engagement, Friendships, Relationships

Pew Research Center reports (2023) that most of the youngest adults use multiple social media sites and apps. About three-quarters of adults under 30 (74%) use Instagram (78%), Snapchat (65%), TikTok (62%), and at least five of the platforms, including Facebook (67%) and YouTube (93%). Use of these platforms has increased controversy and concerns about misinformation and data privacy/security. Furthermore, some research has identified the impact of social media use on depression (Tosun & Kasdarma, 2020), social media fatigue (Chen et al., 2023), sense of well-being (Garibaldi et al., 2022), academic functioning (Hietajarvi et al., 2022), friendship closeness (Pouwels et al., 2021), cognitive dissonance and social media influencers (Tukachinsky Forster & Downey, 2022; Forster et al., 2023). However, there is no research on the sociopsychological impact of social media use among young black groups. Dyadic relationship support is important to students and their mental health (Hubbard et al., 2022; Pouwels et al., 2021). Although some researchers (Pouwels et al., 2021, Tosun & Kasdarma, 2019) have investigated the impact of social media on friendships, the cultural background of the participants was different. Pew Research Center reports a high usage of online platforms by young black groups (ranging from 82% to 39%) with those under 30 years using social media platforms more often (93% to 62%). Thus, understanding the impact of social media on friendships and relationships among black college students, in the U.S. is important. This information can be useful for supporting black college students' success and informing the field of education and counseling. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify how social media usage impacts the relationships of young men and women and compares the time spent on social media to the quality of relationships, both platonic and romantic, for students at Clark Atlanta University.

Social Media Use and Socio-Psychological Effects

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory explains the role of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors on psychosocial functioning. College students today (Gen Z) engage in social media use at a high level of frequency (Pew Reseach Center, 2022). The persuasive power of social media use has been documented, especially on formulation of relationships between individuals (Tukachinsky Forster et al., 2023). Forster et al. contend that on social media, individuals build parasocial relationships which are one sided, for example between an individual and a media influencer. This relationship promotes persuasion and cognitive dissonance affects its quality. For example, Tukachinsky Forster and Downey (2023) demonstrated that if individuals had prior strong parasocial relationships they diminished the importance of a message that was contradictory to their political beliefs, however, if there was no such prior relationship, individuals distanced themselves from the influencer/celebrity. Thus, relationship quality on social media, is affected by prior attitudes and beliefs.

Pouwels et al. (2021) acknowledge the importance of the role of friendships in adolescence and consider how friendship quality may have changed due to transition from face to face to online, through social media use. The researchers observed 387 participants and found that the use of WhatsApp and Instagram was associated with reports of higher levels of friendship closeness, with friendship closeness measured by a single survey question on a 7-point scale. The sample included participants who were students and residents of Netherlands. Netherlands has a different cultural background than the U.S., and especially black college students in a historically black university. A metanalyses of studies on social media use with a focus on academic consequences was conducted by Hietajarvi et al. (2022) who confirm the utility of social media engagement. The researchers identify the antecedents and consequences of social networking, with reasons for social media networking being factors such as loneliness and feelings of inadequacy, among others. The consequences of social media networking have been associated with negative academic outcomes, higher emotional exhaustion and cynicism toward schoolwork for girls, and emotional exhaustion, for boys (Hietajarvi et al.,2022; Chen et al., 2023)**.** Tosun and Kasdarma (2019) studied the association between Facebook engagement and depression among college students in Türkiye. Facebook comparisons with close friends versus acquaintances revealed. Comparisons with acquaintances rather than with close friends had a significant impact on depression based on the emotions evoked. Chen et al. (2023) in their metanalyses identify a state called social media fatigue affecting how one engaged on social media. Findings revealed a 'social media paradox,' whereby social media users want their privacy but are still willing to share personal information online.

Research on the use of social media to establish social connections and affect individual well-being has revealed mixed results (Garibaldi et al., 2022; Tosun & Kasdarma, 2019). Researchers tested if time spent on social media was mediated by motives such as friendship, information, and affected feelings of social connection. Results indicated that using social media for friendship and information predicted higher levels of social connection versus when social media was used to form new relationships. Thus, using social media to keep in touch rather than form new connections delivered positive outcomes as a function of social media use.

Research on social media use in the context of friendships is sparse. Although some research has directly evaluated the role of friendship closeness (Tosun & Kasdarma, 2019; Pouwels et al., 2021), this research has been conducted in different cultural contexts –Netherlands and Türkiye. The cultural context of the U.S., especially that of black college students in a historically black university, is different. Thus, the findings of the past studies may not apply to this population. This study fills this gap by studying the relationship between social media use and friendship and relationship quality among black college students at a historically black university.

Research Hypothesis

There will be a significant relationship between social media use and friendship and relationship quality. Social media use was measured through self-report of activity. Participants were asked to report the social media activity on their phone app. Friendship and relationship quality was measured by the Relationship Quality scale, and Friendship Quality scale.

Method

Participants
Clark Atlanta University students were recruited to participate in the study through posts of the survey link on CANVAS. Instructors gave extra credit for participation. Participants were majority black females and reported using the following social media platforms for an average of 15 hours a week; Instagram, TikTok, and messaging. A total of 50 students responded to the survey.

Measures

The Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988) and the Friendship Qualities Scale (Bukowski et al., 1994) are designed to measure general relationship satisfaction. Participants answered each item on a 5-point scale. The friendship quality scale ranged from 'not at all true' to 'really true' and consisted of 23- items, some examples are, 'my friend and I spend all our free time together', 'my friend would stick up for me if another kid was 'causing me trouble', 'my friend and I argue a lot'. The relationship assessment scale included 7-items on a 5-point scale with scores being interpreted from low satisfaction to high satisfaction, some examples are, 'how well does your partner meet your needs', 'to what extent has your relationship met your original expectations', 'how often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship'. Both the scales are validated in a variety of research settings and have adequate reliability.

Procedures

Current Clark Atlanta students, majority of whom were studying psychology, were asked to answer questions on the online survey using the link posted on CANVAS. The online survey included a consent form and contact information of the researcher and supervisor. If they consented to answer the survey questions, they answered questions regarding the quality of relationships, both platonic and romantic. They were then asked to report how much time they spend on their smartphones weekly and what apps were utilized the most during this time.

Results

To test if there was a relationship between social media use and relationship and friendship quality, a correlational analysis was computed. Time spent on social media use was based on self-report by participants who reported the analytics on their phone on their use of social media (hours spent) weekly. The total friendship and relationship score was computed. Assumptions of conducting correlational analyses were checked and the analyses was computed. Results indicated that social media usage was positively correlated with relationship quality, r (26) = .419, p = .033. There was no significant relationship between social media use and friendship quality, r (32) = -.06, p = .745.

Discussion

Results indicated that social media usage was positively correlated with relationship quality and not with friendship quality. Thus, the hypothesis of this study was partially supported. Past research on friendships indicated a significant relationship between social media use and friendship closeness (Tosun & Kasdarma, 2019; Pouwels et al., 2021). The results of this study however do not support the findings in the context of black college students in the U.S. These findings may be due to reasons such as communication. Perhaps social media enabled more communication and connectivity between partners in a romantic relationship. Most of the respondents reported a high average to the item 'how much do you love your partner,' and the lowest average was to the item, 'how many problems are there in your relationship.'

There was no relationship between social media use and friendship quality. Within their friendships, participants reported that they have disagreements, arguments, fight and apologize every so often, but they are able to maintain a healthy relationship regardless of the type of communication between one another. The highest average was for the item, 'If I have a problem at school or at home, I can talk to my friend about it.' followed by 'I feel happy when I am with my friend.'

Future research will benefit from understanding the longevity of relationships. Thus, it is important to track changes in friendship/relationship quality over time in relation to social media engagement. Additionally, since there seem to be cultural differences, it is important to explore cultural differences in the impact of social media on friendships/relationships through qualitative data collection methods such as interviews or focus groups. Examine mediating/moderating effects of attachment styles, personality traits, communication styles may also help extend the knowledge on relationships -- platonic and romantic. This study provides information that can be beneficial for practitioners in the field of psychology and social work.
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