SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND EMERGING ADULT EXPERIENCES OF PLATFORMS, ACTIVITIES, AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Vanessa P. Dennen[1] and Yasin Yalçin[2]
[1]*Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA*
[2]*Recep Tayyip Erdogan University, Rize, Turkey*

ABSTRACT

Social media is a complex activity that produces positive and negative emotions. This study focuses on negative emotions through a cross-sectional survey of 404 undergraduate university students at an institution in the United States. The survey asked about experiences with different social media platforms and activities and included a new instrument, the Social Media Negative Emotion Questionnaire (SMNEQ). Findings indicate a wide variance in the negative emotions experienced by participants during social media use, with most reporting moderate levels of such emotions. They felt most likely to experience negative emotions due to time spent on social media. Dating apps, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok were the platforms most associated with negative emotions. However, activities related to these platforms, such as online dating and posting among peer groups, did not trigger strong negative emotions among the participant group. Although there were no statistically significant differences based on network ties, there were significant differences based on gender. Specifically, female students reported higher levels of negative emotion on the SMNEQ.

KEYWORDS

Emotion, Social Media, Embarrassment, Shame, Guilt

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media evokes emotional reactions, which makes it compelling to users. For example, people tend to feel good when they receive affirming likes and comments on their posts, receiving desired attention on social media. Conversely, they may feel bad when they receive no attention or see things that trigger envy. These emotional reactions can be so compelling that some scholars have likened social media to a drug, a demon, or a donut (Vanden Abeele et al., 2022), with all three metaphors implying that social media users find themselves unable to break away. In other words, a positive experience – or the promise of or desire for one – leads people

to spend more time and energy on social media, which can lead to additional adverse outcomes. Essentially, negative experiences of social media may reflect experiences related to content, reactions, interactions, and time.

Within the larger realm of negative emotions that people experience (e.g., anger, fear), shame, guilt, and embarrassment are closely related emotions that occur in social contexts (Tangney et al., 1996). Although distinctions are apparent, and neuroscientists have been able to pinpoint different areas of the brain that are affected by each emotion (Bastin et al., 2016), Social media is one context where these emotions can occur, through phenomena like unhealthy social comparison (Alfasi, 2019), and discomfort due to awkward, unplanned interactions (Loh & Walsh, 2021) that create context collapse (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Research on emotions and social media has primarily focused on how they are expressed in social media content (Rout et al., 2018) and people's reactions to specific social media content (Panger, 2017; Wheaton et al., 2021). This study seeks to identify platforms and activities that are most associated with negative emotions in an emerging adult population. Additionally, in recognition of well-established gendered differences in emerging adult social media use, it also explores the relationship between gender, social media use, and negative emotions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media and Emotions

Social media use can be a contradictory activity. People use social media hoping for positive outcomes while knowing that their use comes with some risk of discomfort. Prior studies have found that people persist in using social media because the personal benefits they experience outweigh the risks of discomfort (Dennen, 2009; Lieber, 2010). Still, at some point the experience of discomfort may reach a point where people stop using social media or shift their use to platforms, activities, and social connections that are less likely to induce negative experiences. Prior research, including a study on likes, comments, and social media engagement (Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021), suggests that positive experiences will lead to increased engagement, whereas negative ones will have the opposite effect. However, while people generally pursue positive emotions, favoring experiences that make them feel good, there may be situations in which the inverse is true (Doorley et al., 2020).

Discussing social media use in a dichotomous manner, portraying it as either positive or negative, fails to acknowledge the nuanced ways people experience their emotions and social media. Emotional reactions can be brought on by various conditions, including one's general disposition, one's mood at a particular moment, or a specific situation (Liu et al., 1992). Social media, similarly, is not experienced as a singular activity. Whiting and Williams (2013) describe ten different uses and gratifications related to social media use, including passive and active engagement with people and content. To understand the complex feelings associated with social media use requires investigating the feelings associated with individual uses and at different times.

In terms of holistic outcomes, reviews of research on social media use suggest that social media has a negative – albeit small – effect on people's well-being (Kross et al., 2021; Orben, 2020). However, asking questions about social media use and well-being as broadly construed constructs on a survey may not be helpful for deeply understanding the role that social media

plays in people's lives (Kross et al., 2021). A different study used experience sampling and found that while social media was related to social comparison for university students, it did not necessarily trigger negative feelings among participants (Faelens et al., 2021). Additionally, social media has been simultaneously associated with these negative experiences (e.g., social comparison) alongside positive ones, like social connection and friendship (Marciano et al., 2022). As a social tool, social media shares many functions with other social contexts, including face-to-face settings. Much like people learn to manage interactions in the physical realm, social media users find ways to adjust their social media activities to suit their personal needs and desired outcomes.

2.2 Emerging Adults and Social Media Use

Emerging adults – often defined as people aged between their late teens and twenties and informally referred to as youth – are a group of people who are experiencing a developmental period in which they increasingly have new experiences, explore their identity, and find their own place in the world (Arnett, 2000). Youth are known to be heavy users of social media. The 18-29 demographic in the United States uses most social media platforms at a higher rate than any other adult demographic group (Gottfried, 2024), and similarly to their slightly younger teenage counterparts (Anderson et al., 2023). Still, not all emerging adults use social media to the same extent or in the same ways. One study found that white women were likely to be the emerging adult demographic that spends the most time on social media (Scott et al., 2017). Regardless of demographic, emerging adults work to develop and refine their online identities, which may vary in fidelity to their true selves and alternatively may represent a false or ideal self (Michikyan, 2020). Much as they develop in their offline lives, they also engage in developmental activities online.

The reasons why youth use social media are complex, and their corresponding feelings about their social media use are equally complex. Emotions like guilt have been associated with concerns about time spent on social media (Panek, 2014), level of messaging activity (Halfmann et al., 2021), and conflicts arising with friends and family due to social media use (Luqman et al., 2020). For contemporary youth, the diverse activities that they engage in online can lead to equally diverse emotions, creating a "see-saw" effect in which any particular use might trigger both positive and negative reactions (Weinstein, 2018). Although some youth may find social media to be a social panacea, and others may perceive it as a toxic digital wasteland, for most its use is accepted or assumed as a part of navigating contemporary life.

As they navigate online spaces, youth find ways to distance themselves from negative experiences, such as the drama inherent in online connections to peer groups (Dennen et al., 2017). Throughout high school, social media heavily intertwined with their (Dennen et al., 2020; Rutledge et al., 2019) and in-person (Dredge & Schreurs, 2020) social experiences. This need to maintain connections between social media worlds and school experiences extends through university (Dennen et al., in press), and can help mitigate offline loneliness in the midst of transition (Thomas et al., 2020). Online interactions with their close peers hold more weight than reactions from strangers (Mattke et al., 2020). Thus, achieving separation between one's online and offline worlds can be difficult and may not be desirable.

Because of its ubiquitous presence and well-documented incidents with negative behaviors, researchers and practitioners across diverse disciplines are interested in how youth use social media (Greenhow et al., 2019). Researchers have sought to better understand the relationship

between social media use and social relationships, well-being, and mental health. For example, a study that used experience sampling to study adolescent reactions to passive social media use found that sense of well-being varies across the population (Beyens et al., 2020). Similarly, adolescent reasons for using social media platforms like Instagram have been studied, finding that they vary based on personal need for feedback, levels of social comparison, and intensity of use (Sanchez-Hernandez et al., 2022). Across this body of literature, it becomes apparent that social media users navigate both positive and negative elements of the medium and make personal choices in order to achieve their desired outcomes.

3. CONTEXT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study, we investigate the role negative emotions play in social media use, focusing on use by university students. Developmentally, university is a time of transition for many students. Those who attend shortly after completing high school use social media to assist with various informational, informal learning, and social needs during that transition (Dennen et al., 2023). Their social media use is less monitored than it is during the high school years (Dennen et al., 2019), and university students are expected to be more mature social media users than their slightly younger peers. Of course, this does not make them immune to negative emotions when using social media.

In this study, social media is broadly defined to include not only popular social networking sites, but also other online platforms through which social networking and sharing occur such as watch party and messaging applications. The questions guiding this study are:

1. To what degree do university students experience negative emotions when using social media?
2. What social media platforms are most associated with negative emotions?
3. What activities are most associated with negative emotions on social media?
4. Are there gendered differences related to social media use and negative emotions?
5. Are there any differences related to social media use and negative emotions in terms of the intensity of network ties?

These questions are addressed via data collected from a cross-sectional survey of university students.

4. METHOD

Participants in this study were 404 undergraduate students at a large public university in the United States. They were recruited through a research participation pool situated in one university college. Participants' ages ranged between 18 and 36, with a mean of 20.37 and a standard deviation of 1.92. Most of the participants firmly fit within the emerging adult group. There were 113 male (28.0%), 285 female (70.5%), and 6 non-binary (1.5%) participants among the sample. In terms of class standing, there were 42 freshmen (11.9%), 82 sophomores (20.3%), 143 juniors (35.4%), and 131 seniors (32.4%) in the sample. While a convenient sample, university students are an appropriate population for doing initial work in this area. Although the sample in this study skews female, the gender balance is representative of the larger college population from which the sample was recruited.

The survey used in the study was a subset of a larger survey. For this analysis, we include demographic items, 21 items about negative emotions experienced when using different platforms, 16 items about negative emotions experienced when engaged in different social media activities, and the Social Media Negative Emotion Questionnaire (SMNEQ). The SMNEQ is an 18-item scale designed by the researchers for this study. It is loosely based on the Brief Shame and Guilt Questionnaire (BSGQ; Novin & Rieffe, 2015), an instrument used to measure a person's predisposition for experiencing shame and guilt. Specifically, the SMNEQ uses the same items format, scale, and scoring procedure. However, the items focus on social media scenarios, and rather than using two sub-scales to measure shame and guilt, the SMNEQ asks about scenarios that may lead to feelings of shame, guilt, or embarrassment as a single scale.

Each item of the SMNEQ presents participants with a scenario related to social media use. These situations are associated with behaviors that could lead to negative emotions such as shame (negative emotions based on one's social media actions and how others might perceive them), guilt (negative emotions based on outcomes of one's social media actions), or embarrassment (negative emotions based on how one is portrayed on social media). Note that while someone may experience all three emotions in a public setting, shame and guilt are likely to be internally experienced and processed when the individual is alone (Tangney et al., 1996). The scale asks participants to indicate to what extent they would experience negative emotions if they were to encounter the situation. The items are scored on a scale consisting of 1*: Not at all, 2: A little,* and *3: A lot*. The SMNEQ scale showed good internal consistency reliability with a coefficient alpha value of $a = .873$, which is similar to the reliability of the BSGQ (Broekhof et al., 2020; Novin & Rieffe, 2015).

The SMNEQ and other survey items were developed and refined via a focus group and subsequent pilot testing process with undergraduate students. The study was approved by the researchers' Institutional Review Board, and participants consented prior to participating. Data collection occurred via an online survey using the Qualtrics online survey platform.

Data analysis entailed using descriptive statistics to answer the first three research questions. Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to investigate mean differences between male and female students to answer the fourth research question. Finally, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to investigate mean differences related to social media use and negative emotions in terms of the intensity of network ties.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Negative Emotions on Social Media

To answer the first research question, individual items of the SMNEQ were analyzed descriptively. Scores ranged from a low of 18 (n = 16), meaning that the participant reported no negative emotions related to social media use to a high of 54 (n = 2), meaning that the participant reported a likelihood of experiencing negative emotions on each item. The mean was close to the midpoint for possible scores ($M = 32.06$, $SD = 6.99$), and the median and mode were 32 and 36, respectively. These findings suggest that most participants associate certain situations with negative emotions, although not every situation is likely to create a strong degree of negative emotion and some participants are free of negative emotions altogether in this context. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the individual SMNEQ items in descending order of the mean values.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Social Media Negative Emotion Questionnaire

	Mean	SD
You have a big assignment due tomorrow, but you spend 30 minutes scrolling through your social media feed. You feel guilty.	2.25	.663
You post a new photo to your profile. You think you look very attractive in this photo. No one likes or comments on it. You feel embarrassed.	2.11	.723
You had an unfortunate event happen while you were with a friend. The friend writes a post about your misfortune and tags you in the post. You feel embarrassed.	2.09	.781
Your best friend gets sloppy drunk and starts posting random and out of character things to Instagram. You could try to stop them, but you don't because the posts are funny. You feel guilty.	2.05	.720
Your friend borrows your phone to look something up while you go pick up some coffee. Suddenly you realize your friend could access your search history. Recently you were searching for information on a topic you consider private. You feel ashamed.	2.01	.740
You screenshot an embarrassing post from an acquaintance's private account so you can share it with a friend and then message it to the friend. You feel guilty.	1.98	.770
You post a photo from your birthday party even though your best friend thinks they look bad in that photo. You feel guilty.	1.91	.655
Your mom posts photos of you at your most awkward point during your tween years and tags you. You feel embarrassed.	1.88	.759
You want to share a photo but feel it is unflattering so you edit it before posting it. You feel ashamed.	1.86	.729
You share a post to your account and a friend comments that it is fake news. You feel embarrassed.	1.83	.739
You get your weekly screentime report on your phone and see that your time on social media increased last week. You feel ashamed.	1.81	.754
You're at a special family event, but checking social media on your phone when you hope no one is looking. A family member notices and gives you a look. You feel guilty.	1.79	.721
You post about your recent activities with friends but restrict the posts so your family can't see them. You feel guilty.	1.46	.638
You are out to dinner with a group of people who start discussing how many social media followers they have. You realize you have fewer than anyone else there. You feel embarrassed.	1.45	.630
You download a new app to check it out. Some of your friends have said the app is for losers, but you like it. You bury the app in a folder on your phone so no one else is likely to see it. You feel ashamed.	1.44	.601

Your friend comments that they noticed you are following a somewhat cringey celebrity online. You feel embarrassed.	1.41	.580
You meet someone at a party, go home, and stalk their online profiles. You feel ashamed.	1.39	.586
You are curious about a topic that you're not comfortable discussing with friends. You investigate it online. You feel ashamed.	1.35	.568

Participants also were asked to use a five-point scale (1 = extremely unlikely and 5= extremely likely) to indicate how likely they were to experience negative emotions under thirteen different circumstances (see Table 2). The items with higher means had larger standard deviations than those with lower means, showing greater dispersion of responses for these items. Time emerged as the most likely scenario for experiencing negative emotions, particularly when time spent on social media takes away from important activities. Inherently public elements of social media use, such as platforms used, friends, and likes, were rated least likely to generate negative emotions. Further, for the scenarios represented in four of the five items with the lowest means, less than 20% of the sample indicated they were likely or extremely likely to experience negative emotions due to these circumstances.

Table 2. Likelihood of experiencing negative emotions

Item	Mean	SD
When I spend time on social media instead of doing important things	3.57	1.38
How much time I spend on social media	3.09	1.29
Items other people have posted about me on social media	2.57	1.31
Items I have searched for on social media	2.54	1.26
Items I have shared on social media	2.48	1.23
My family members' actions on social media	2.41	1.26
My friends' actions on social media	2.35	1.20
Likes received by items I have posted on social media	2.25	1.26
Items I have "liked" on social media*	2.24	1.15
How many followers I have on social media	2.20	1.25
Items I have saved or bookmarked on social media*	2.16	1.18
People I have followed on social media*	2.03	1.10
Social media platforms that I use*	1.99	1.10

NOTE: 1 = extremely unlikely and 5= extremely likely
           * = less than 20% of the sample reported that they would experience negative emotions for these items

5.2 Social Media Platforms Associated with Negative Emotions

The second research question addressed social media platforms associated with negative emotions. Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they experienced negative emotions like shame, guilt, or embarrassment when using these platforms. The responses were scored on a 3-point Likert scale which consisted of *1: Not at all, 2: A little,* and *3: A lot*. The results are presented in Table 3. The platforms that were most strongly associated with negative emotions were dating apps, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. Platforms that were least likely to be associated with negative emotions were watching party apps, payment applications, Twitch, Pinterest, and streaming video services.

Table 3. Social media platforms and negative emotions

	N	Mean	SD
Dating apps	191	1.76	.707
Instagram	403	1.69	.672
TikTok	361	1.57	.688
Snapchat	400	1.57	.634
Yik Yak	152	1.34	.575
Facebook	355	1.27	.509
Twitter [platform name since changed to X]	355	1.25	.510
Reddit	152	1.24	.498
Networked online gaming	148	1.21	.484
YouTube	391	1.18	.426
Messaging Apps	357	1.15	.414
Discord	122	1.15	.400
Video Conferencing	390	1.14	.372
Streaming Video Services	394	1.11	.376
Pinterest	288	1.10	.341
Payment Applications	389	1.07	.291
Watching Party	137	1.07	.312

NOTE: N represents active users. Only platforms with 100 or more active users reported.

5.3 Social Media Activities Associated with Negative Emotions

The third research question addressed social media activities associated with negative emotions. Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they experienced negative emotions like shame, guilt, or embarrassment when engaging in these activities. The responses were scored on a 3-point Likert scale which consisted of *1: Not at all, 2: A little,* and *3: A lot*. The results are presented in Table 4. The activities that were most associated with negative emotions were searching for dates, viewing or reading what peers posted, posting photos to social media,

posting updates to social media, following celebrities on social media, and interacting with peers on social media.

Although posting updates to one's social media accounts in the form of photos and updates was potentially associated with negative emotions for around 45% of the sample, those rates drop to less than 30% when asked about posting memes or links to one's profile or documenting one's life for personal consumption. Activities that were least likely to generate negative emotions were playing a networked game, supporting hobbies and interests, sharing links to social media profiles, exploring future, and supporting health and wellness.

Table 4. Social media activities and negative emotions

	N	Mean	SD
Search for dates online	188	1.65	.703
View/read what peers have posted to their social media profiles	397	1.50	.673
Post photos from my life to my social media profiles	391	1.50	.559
Post updates about my life to my social media profiles	362	1.46	.551
Follow celebrities on social media	367	1.38	.579
Interact with peers on their social media profiles	400	1.36	.584
Read news posted to social media	378	1.36	.585
Document my life/memories	378	1.31	.509
Post memes to my social media profiles	267	1.30	.536
Exchange direct messages (DMs) with my friends	399	1.29	.540
Make creative work to share online	249	1.28	.483
Support health and wellness	372	1.27	.548
Explore my future	372	1.25	.519
Share links to my social media profiles	260	1.23	.455
Support hobbies and interests	375	1.21	.475
Play a networked game	250	1.18	.402

NOTE: N represents only participants who reported engaging in an activity

5.4 Gendered Differences

The fourth research question addressed gendered differences related to social media use and negative emotions. To answer the research question, we conducted an independent sample's *t*-test and investigated the mean difference between male and female students on the SMNEQ total scores. The *t*-test found that male students ($M = 29.81$, $SD = 7.64$) experienced significantly lower levels of negative social media emotions compared to female students ($M = 33.07$, $SD = 6.49$), $t(396) = -4.279$, $p < .001$. Moreover, we conducted a series of independent samples *t*-tests to investigate differences between male and female students on their negative emotions associated with social media platforms and activities. In terms of social media platforms, *t*-test

results revealed that male students experienced significantly lower levels of negative emotions on Instagram ($t(395) = -3.551$, $p < .001$, $M_{male} = 1.51$, $M_{female} = 1.77$, Cohen's $d = .664$), TikTok ($t(355) = -2.453$, $p = .015$, $M_{male} = 1.43$, $M_{female} = 1.63$, Cohen's $d = .685$), and dating apps ($t(185) = -3.139$, $p = .002$, $M_{male} = 1.52$, $M_{female} = 1.86$, Cohen's $d = .688$). Furthermore, in terms of social media activities, t-test results revealed that male students experienced significantly lower levels of negative emotions when engaging in posting updates about their lives ($t(197.491) = -2.990$, $p = .003$, $M_{male} = 1.32$, $M_{female} = 1.50$, Cohen's $d = .547$), documenting life or memories ($t(207.489) = -2.170$, $p = .031$, $M_{male} = 1.23$, $M_{female} = 1.35$, Cohen's $d = .508$), and following celebrities ($t(205.620) = -2.038$, $p = .043$, $M_{male} = 1.29$, $M_{female} = 1.42$, Cohen's $d = .578$).

What these findings do not account for, however, are the perceptions of individuals who opt out of a platform or activity. Due to how the survey was constructed, participants were only asked to report on negative emotions for platforms that they currently use and activities in which they currently engage. In some instances, the number of current users was close to the number of participants.

Participants were only asked to report negative emotions based on platforms that they currently use and activities in which they currently engage. It is possible that some participants decline to use platforms or engage in activities because they associate the platforms and activities with a risk of experiencing negative emotions. In other words, participants with the strongest negative associations for specific platforms or activities may not have been asked to rate those items. Instead, items responses all come from active users.

5.5 Social Media Use and Intensity of Network Ties

The final research question addressed mean differences related to social media use and negative emotions in terms of the intensity of network ties. In the online survey, participants were asked to indicate the intensity of their network ties on social media. The response options were i) I have a few close friends and choose to not interact widely beyond that circle, ii) I have a wide circle of friends and acquaintances with whom I interact, and iii) I have a few close friends and a wide circle of friends and acquaintances with whom I interact. The frequency distribution of the responses is presented in Table 5. To investigate mean differences related to social media use and negative emotions among the groups, we used mean SMNEQ scores as the dependent measure and the network ties groups as the factor and conducted a one-way ANOVA. Levene's test of homogeneity of variances was significant ($p < .001$). As a result, the Welch test is reported since it is a more robust test for the violation of homogeneity of variances. The Welch test was not significant ($F(2, 174.435) = .880$, $p = .417$) suggesting that the perceived negative emotions on social media did not differ based on the intensity of network ties.

Table 5. Intensity of network ties

	N	%
I have a few close friends and choose to not interact widely beyond that circle	97	24.0
I have a wide circle of friends and acquaintances with whom I interact	92	22.8
I have a few close friends and a wide circle of friends and acquaintances with whom I interact	215	53.2

6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings show that university students experience are diverse in their experience of negative emotions when using social media. The variance in how this population feels about social media is not surprising, and is similar to the findings of Beyens et al. (2020), which stressed the individualized nature of how adolescents experience social media and well-being. Most students reported negative emotions at a moderate level, meaning that they only had mild negative emotions or strong negative emotions were limited to just a few situations. Viewed in light of findings from other studies, such as the limited effect of social media use on self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2021), it appears likely that social media users find ways to mitigate or minimize their individual negative experiences on social media. This would, in turn, allow them to use social media in ways that result in perceived benefits and positive outcomes.

Findings show that platforms and activities most heavily associated with peer social interaction and self-disclosure were likely to yield negative emotions. These findings provide some initial insights into the specific everyday activities that lead to negative emotions when using social media, and the degree of those experiences. For example, getting positive attention such as likes on social media are connected to self-esteem (Marengo et al., 2021). It is not surprising, then, to see that for some social media users a dearth of attention could lead to negative emotions. Our findings about platforms and activities reinforce findings from earlier studies about the diverse nature of social media use (Weinstein, 2018) and confirm that passive social media use does not inherently have deleterious effects (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Many of the SMNEQ items that were most likely to result in negative emotions related to online identity, which further aligns with the platform and activity findings. Online identity appears to be an area of fragility. It is comprised of both one's identity performance and relational activity (Cover, 2012). University students are concerned about how they are perceived and how they are portrayed. Although this study did not ask about experiences of positive emotions, it seems likely that the experiences that trigger negative emotions also have the capability of leading to positive outcomes.

The SMNEQ items asked an equal number of questions about shame, guilt, and embarrassment, providing diverse scenarios in which each might be experienced. Distinctions among the emotions were not evident in the data, not even for embarrassment. In other words, no particular emotion appears to be most or least prevalent within this sample. This may reflect the close relationship among these emotions (Tangney et al., 1996) or it could indicate that specific activities are more likely than to trigger negative affect, regardless of emotion, than being prone to experience a specific emotion.

When asked more generally about experiencing negative emotions due to social media use, participants indicated that the time they spend on social media is the most likely thing to make them feel bad. More research into this area would be useful. Although it is well-established that emerging adults spend a lot of time on social media, presumably they do so by choice or, as some have suggested, due to addiction. Supposing they have choice, then their association of negative emotions with time spent on social media may not represent authentic emotions based on screen time. Instead, the association could reflect the larger social discourse that suggests time spent online is time wasted.

Prior studies can be used to explain the significant differences found between male and female participants. Others studies have found that females are more engaged in online social support than males (Tifferet, 2020), and this increased interpersonal element could make them

more vulnerable to negative experiences. Females have also been found to have greater privacy concerns (Tifferet, 2019), which also may connect to this same sense of vulnerability, which is exacerbated by situations where privacy may be risked for social rewards (Hallam & Zanella, 2017).

7. CONCLUSION

Based on these findings, we conclude that many university students use social media despite the potential that doing so will lead to some level of negative emotion. Further, when their social media use focuses on identity and relationship issues, the corresponding vulnerability leads to associations with negative emotions. These findings do not mean that social media is inherently bad when used for such purposes. Rather, one might consider the virtual social realm as an extension of the physical social realm, opening up users to similar vulnerabilities and the potential for triggering negative emotions.

This study has several limitations. It did not explore the full range of negative emotions or negative scenarios that individuals might experience, and focuses narrowly on a specific cross-section of emerging adults who were undergraduate students at one institution in the United States. The findings from this population should not be generalized to other youth populations (e.g., high school students and young adults who have not attended university), and should also be considered in terms of the institutional and cultural context of the sample. The study did not consider positive emotions, and the survey only asked participants to rate platforms they actively used, potentially overlooking individuals who have chosen not to use specific platforms due to corresponding negative emotions.

This study has implications for people who work with youth and for researchers who study social media use. By understanding which platforms and activities are most associated with negative emotions, we can seek ways to help youth navigate their social media use and even avoid some negative experiences. Additionally, the SMNEQ provides a helpful way to measure one's propensity to experience negative emotions when using social media. Future research should be done to further refine and validate the SMNEQ, consider the role of positive emotions, and expand this line of inquiry to other populations. Additionally, as this line of research evolves, it might include an exploration of how individual differences factor into one's experience of social media.

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