Do Social Media Impact Young Adult Mental Health and Well-Being? A Qualitative Study

British Journal of Social Work (2022) **52**, 4664–4683
https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac078
Advance Access Publication April 26, 2022

Do Social Media Impact Young Adult Mental Health and Well-Being? A Qualitative Study

Paul Dodemaide [1,*], Mark Merolli[2], Nicole Hill[1] and Lynette Joubert[1]

[1]*Social Work Department, School of Health Sciences, University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC 3010, Australia*
[2]*School of Health Sciences, Centre for Digital Transformation of Health, Centre for Health, Exercise and Sports Medicine, The University of Melbourne Parkville, VIC 3010, Australia*

*Correspondence to Paul Dodemaide, Social Work Department, School of Health Sciences, University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC 3010, Australia. E-mail: *pdodemaide@student.unimelb.edu.au*

Abstract

The Social Work profession recognises the ethical and educational implications of social media usage but remains cautious in embracing the technology in the context of clinical practice. Social media platforms allow their users to share thoughts, opinions, experiences, information, develop online communities and access social and emotional support. Social media-focused research in the mental health context has described the risk of vulnerable populations using social media. However, there is a dearth of research examining the lived experiences of young adult social media users or addressing both the perceived risks and benefits. Social Work clinicians need to understand the experience of clients and be able to respond to questions or challenges that service users using social media experience. Deploying inductive thematic content analysis, this study presents the qualitative findings of an online survey eliciting the experience of young adult social media users. Young adults reported varying perspectives, including preferences for anonymity, how social media is employed and consideration that specific platforms are either helpful or harmful. Results are discussed with consideration given to existing literature. This article contributes to the evidence-base for social work and other disciplines, allowing for a greater phenomenological understanding of young adults' use of social media.

Keywords: lived experience, mental health, phenomenology, qualitative method, social media, well-being, young adult

Accepted: April 2022

Introduction

Social Work has recently recognised the ethical and educational implications of social media usage (British Association of Social Workers, 2018), but been cautious in embracing the technology in the context of clinical practice (Boddy and Dominelli, 2017). Social media-focused research in the mental health context has described the risk of vulnerable populations using social media (e.g. Tan *et al.*, 2021). Social work clinicians need to understand the experience of clients and be able to respond to the challenges they experience using social media. This study contributes to the emerging evidence base for social work and other disciplines, providing a greater phenomenological understanding of social media use for young adults.

Social media

Social media enable the participatory, collaborative and interpersonal opportunities of the internet (Carr and Hayes, 2015). Social media allow users to share thoughts, opinions, develop new online communities and access social and emotional support (Caplan and Purser, 2019). Increasingly social media are being recognised for their help-seeking potential (Webber and Moors, 2015) and opportunities for peer support and solidarity (e.g. Pérez-Sabater, 2021).

As social media evolve, developers modify and adapt different features, creating perceived overlaps between otherwise distinguishable social media types. However, when understanding the different types of social media, many categories include social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) whose essential characteristics involve its users creating a profile page and connecting and interacting with other users; video sharing sites (e.g. TikTok and YouTube), and image sharing sites (e.g. Instagram), whose essential characteristics are the ability to view videos or photos uploaded by others, to search for specific content, to create a profile and create and share content of their own. These can be informative, for entertainment or creative expression.

Social media also include blogging sites, which allow people to create a profile and blog (digital journal), or just follow or subscribe the blogs of others. Social media include microblogs (e.g. Twitter) whose essential characteristics are the creation of a user profile, connecting with others for news or entertainment; however there are tighter limits on the number of characters used, hence *micro*blogs. Wikis (e.g. Wikipedia) are a form of social media whose essential characteristics involve user generated and monitored informational pages. Increasingly popular social media are multiplayer social games (e.g. Minecraft and Fortnite), particularly the interactive features within live video streaming (e.g.

Twitch), or voice channel (e.g. Discord) which allow multiplayer social gaming community to connect online to enhance interaction between gamers, enabling larger audiences to interact with each other.

Social work and social media

Social media have proven to be an effective adjunct to other means of offline support, particularly for young adults resistant to engaging with traditional social work services (Best *et al.*, 2016). Yet, much of the related clinical social work research focuses on ethical issues requiring social workers to navigate. These include surveillance (Cooner *et al.*, 2020), 'friend' requests and managing dual relationships (Keeney, 2019). There is a paucity of social work research addressing the lived experiences of young adult social media users, nor identifying the risks and benefits of social media use. Continued research is required to ensure the social work profession and policy makers have the evidence base to effectively realise the potential of social media within the clinical context (Hammond *et al.*, 2018), both for social workers as well as service users.

Young adult mental health and well-being

Whilst existing literature tends to focus more on child, adolescent and adult development, the transitional period of young adulthood is largely under-investigated, under-reported and inconsistently defined. Young adult typically refers to ages eighteen to twenty-nine years (Grant and Potenza, 2009), however has been noted in some material to occasionally include eighteen to thirty-four years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Most serious mental illnesses develop and peak in young adulthood, and the period is one of many transitions, identity development and influenced by personality (Cunningham and Duffy, 2019; Grant and Potenza, 2009). Michaeli *et al.* (2019) argue, that at a time of continued brain development, young adults need support from others, as they are typically transitioning to more independent post-secondary learning environments, increasing their risk taking and often eating and sleeping poorly. More research needs to be undertaken to inform how friends, family, services and social workers can ensure targeted, meaningful support for social and emotional well-being of young adults (Cunningham and Duffy, 2019).

By privileging the voices of young adult social media users through an online survey, the present study seeks to provide impetus for social workers to develop better insight into the lived experiences of young adults using social media.

Methodology

The present study reports on findings from a cross-sectional online survey undertaken by the authors, which sought a mix of quantitative and qualitative data from young adult social media users about their lived experience, and expertise with using social media. The quantitative results focusing on therapeutic affordances, and quality of life are reported elsewhere (Dodemaide *et al.*, 2021), whilst the qualitative results are reported herein.

The online survey was launched in February 2018, remaining open for eight weeks. The survey was designed using the Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap) application hosted on the University of Melbourne infrastructure (University of Melbourne, n.d.). The online survey design was adapted from Merolli *et al.* (2014), and Shoebotham and Coulson (2016), and tailored towards young adults, eighteen to thirty-four years old, who used social media. The aim was to invariably give primacy to their views of social media, gained through their lived experience.

Piloting

The survey was piloted amongst six social work students, aged twenty-one to thirty-two years, and of mixed gender. Three were at qualifying Masters level and three were Bachelor level students. The group selected due to their training and understanding of the target audience. We also trialled the survey's accessibility across various devices.

Ethics

This study obtained approval by The University of Melbourne, Behavioural and Social Sciences Human Ethics Sub-Committee (Ethics ID 1750388). All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study.

Survey design

The primary research question, 'What can social work learn from the lived experience of young adult social media users?', informed the formation of the twenty-eight online survey items seeking qualitative responses (Table 1).

Table 1. Qualitative items

Item	
1–10	If anonymity preferred in [social media type], explain why you prefer to be anonymous
11–20	Use the space below to tell us anything else you think we should know about how you use [social media type]
21	If some social media more helpful for you than others when you're trying to manage your overall mood and well-being, list these here and any detail to explain why you believe this
22	If some social media more harmful for you than others when you're trying to manage your overall mood and well-being, list these here and any detail to explain why you believe this
23	Use the space below to tell us anything else you think we should know about how you use social media
24	Feel free to provide any detail about the help-seeking choices of a friend or someone close to you
25	If you believe there is any link between your friend or someone close to you, self-harm/suicidal thoughts and their use of social media, explain here
26	Feel free to provide any detail about your own help-seeking
27	If you believe there is any link between your self-harm/suicidal thoughts and your social media use, explain here
28	Use the space below to make any further comments about how you personally use social media; as well as any beliefs you might have about the impact of social media on young adults like you

Data collection

Young adults were recruited via a social media strategy involving promotion, advertising and subsequent snowballing sampling. A dedicated Facebook page @socialmediausesurvey was created and AUD$500 spent in Facebook advertising to promote the 'Call for Participants', reaching 27,212 profiles. Of these, 21,816 (80.2 per cent) identified as women in their profiles, 4,850 (17.8 per cent) as men, whilst 546 (2.0 per cent) gender identity was not indicated. Additionally, a dedicated Twitter page @SMandYoungAdult was created to promote the survey using Twitter's ordinary communication functions of tweets, hashtags and direct messaging within the researchers existing social network. No gender-identifying data were available through Twitter analytics. The call to participate was offered through promotion on Facebook and Twitter only. Participants were self-selecting, non-randomised and received no reimbursement for completing the survey.

There were $N = 237$ surveys initiated. Following exclusions for the ages (<18 years, $n = 1$, 35+ years old, $n = 7$) and for those not consenting ($n = 21$). A total of 208 participants completed the survey (one hundred ninety-one female, fourteen male and three transgender), of these, a

final sample of $n = 118$ (57 per cent) participants responded to at least one of the twenty-eight qualitative questions (55 per cent of females, 71.4 per cent of males and 100 per cent of transgender). Within this final cohort, there was an unequal distribution of age groups, and participants were largely female, from the UK or Australia, and most identified as heterosexual and single (Table 2). Most were tertiary educated, employed regularly or studying/training.

Data analysis

Coding followed inductive thematic content analysis. The approach was a realist one, in which it was sought to elicit the 'experiences, meanings and the reality of participants' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The semantic themes were identified and then grouped at a broader level, as much as possible in keeping with the language of the participant as much as possible. Importantly, all themes were highlighted as opposed to a simple reporting on high-frequency themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Table 2. Sample characteristics

Age	*n*	Per cent	Marital status	*n*	Per cent
18–21 yo	33	28.0	Single	71	60.2
22–25 yo	36	30.5	Married/partnered	42	35.6
26–29 yo	24	20.3	Separated/divorced	3	2.5
30–34 yo	25	21.2	Widowed	2	1.7
Gender	***n***	**Per cent**	**Level of education**	***n***	**Per cent**
Female	105	89.0	Middle/Junior High School Grade 7–9	0	0.0
Male	10	8.5	High/Senior School Grade 10–12	36	30.5
Transgender	3	2.5	Undergraduate/college degree	50	42.4
			Graduate degree	32	27.1
Sexuality	***n***	**Per cent**	**Employment**	***n***	**Per cent**
Heterosexual	69	58.5	Full time	42	35.6
Lesbian/gay	5	4.2	Part time	32	27.1
Bisexual	33	28.0	Casual	9	7.6
Undisclosed	11	9.3	Not working for pay	35	29.7
Country	***n***	**Per cent**	**Reason not working for pay**	***n***	**Per cent**
Austria	1	0.8	Home making/caring for family	7	5.9
Australia	31	26.3	Looking but can't find a job	5	4.2
Canada	3	2.5	Doing unpaid work/voluntary activities	0	0.0
Germany	1	0.8	Studying/training	18	15.3
UK	57	48.3	Ill health or disability	5	4.2
USA	14	11.9			
South Africa	1	0.8			

Results

Anonymity

Anonymity was preferred by many participants, described as allowing them to freely express themselves without fear of being identified in real life. A notable example of this was described by participant:

> I'm a health professional so I don't want clients to find me online. (Participant 58)

Linking social media to past suicidal ideation/self-harm

These responses provide an overall perspective that views social media as overwhelmingly negative for someone with pre-existing vulnerability to mental illness and a belief that they may experience an exacerbation of suicidality symptoms. For example, one participant reports:

> My suicidal ideation increases when on social media a lot. (Participant 13)

For others, thoughts of self-harm or suicidal ideation involved having seen the lives of others as presented on social media. One participant described, when on social media they were:

> Unfavourably comparing myself to others. (Participant 39)

Whilst another participant reported:

> I kept seeing everyone enjoying life online and I felt so isolated and alone. At times feeling deliberately left out, so I had a hard time dealing with it. (Participant 102)

Social media more helpful or harmful than others

There was a variety of perspectives from participants as to which specific platforms were more helpful or harmful than others when trying to manage their overall mood and well-being. YouTube was reported as helpful for mood, distraction and escapism. One participant explained it as

> [G]reat for my depression as I don't have to interact at all. I can just watch. (Participant 16)

Instagram was noted for lifting participants' mood when browsing the images, a feeling also experienced through the editing and preparation of image-based content to actively post to Instagram, as one participant described

> Instagram is more positive and supportive environment. (Participant 19)

However, participants also reported Instagram as being more harmful, particularly when exposed to idealised perfection of others. Instagram enabled the participants' negative self-perception, self-esteem, body image, unrealistic expectations and presenting others' lives and bodies as perfect. One participant described:

> ... seeing very skinny and beautiful girls when I am overweight! Makes me feel bad about myself. (Participant 11)

Facebook was reported by participants for being more helpful than others, referring to its capacity to facilitate communication with others close to them, to organise offline activities and events and to intentionally engage with specific support groups within it

> Facebook is better because I can talk to people when I feel low. (Participant 33)

However, Facebook also led to consumers comparing themselves to others within their social network. Participants also described the addictive nature of scrolling through the news feed of posts and pictures or clips of others, again creating unrealistic expectations of themselves.

> ... any social media you can see people out having a great time is not good when you're feeling lonely and depressed and too anxious to leave the house. (Participant 91)

For other briefly mentioned SM types, a participant's personal blog was described favourably as enabling them to express themselves. Twitter as a source of humour, Tumblr and Pinterest reported as forms of escapism and Snapchat for keeping in contact with significant others. Twitter and Tumblr were described for their negativity, toxic communication and triggering content for those with mental illness. Reddit and 4Chan were mentioned for being unregulated platforms.

The responses to the questions of 'help-seeking' did not contribute anything further regarding social media and were therefore not included.

Thematic content analysis of open-ended questions

The following section reports on the themes drawn from the remaining twelve open-ended items. Three themes identified within this content were, 'social media is amazing' (Participant 60), 'I think it's horrible .. It's probably negative for most people' (Participant 106) and 'It depends [on] who you're following and how you're using social media' (Participant 82).

'Social media is amazing'

Participants described the useful and practical ways that young adults engage in social media, from connecting with others, overcoming barriers and developing their social network, through to developing their professional and academic networks. They described the utility of accessing and sharing news and information, for entertainment and sharing image-based content enabling them to 'escape from reality' (Participant 75) for a whilst, also the cathartic or emotionally rewarding experience of actively engaging in blogs and providing the content. Social media enable some participants to browse content, whilst others create and distribute content to a broader audience. One participant described

> [social media] are good for channelling thoughts and emotions in a constructive way when you're not able to share things with others face-to-face. (Participant 90)

Video sharing were reported for mental health and physical health benefits, referring to the ease of access to desired content, similarly, for those seeking information about self-improvement, meditation, topics of interest or education. Video sharing sites enabled posting, sharing and storing of content, whether short videos from memories with friends, collation of preferred content. Participants reported reasoning for using video sharing sites

> ... for entertainment, or ... informative/intellectually stimulating podcasts. (Participant 79)
>
> ... to find workout videos. (Participant 92)
>
> ... for finding mood lifting content. (Participant 90)

Social media were perceived to have had a profound impact on participants' lives, from accessing desired information through to opening new social opportunities. One participant described

> [social media] probably saved my life ... I received support from others, made friends, gained a purpose from volunteering, ... and found what I want to do in life. (Participant 47)

However, for some participants, time spent on social media was not positive.

'I Think it's horrible ... it's probably negative for most people'

Participants described time wasted on social media, leaving them feeling down. Others reported regularly taking month-long breaks from social media or were considering deleting their accounts. One participant described using social media

> … to numb any negative feelings I experience. But if I spend too much time on social media, I start to feel even worse. (Participant 39)

Other participants reported their belief that, despite their connection and social interaction intent, social media were leading to increased alienation, anti-social behaviour and narcissism as well as reduced face-to-face interaction. One participant described

> [Social media] decreases actual social interactions … [and] there is some link between feeling lonely and depressed with the amount of social media usage. (Participant 90)

Another reported that

> [Social media] fuels antisocial behaviour and narcissism. (Participant 79)

Social media led young adults to compete and compare themselves with others, resulting in unrealistic and fake, expectations and presentations on social media. One participant reported

> When you see people having a good time and you're alone not doing anything you feel left out. (Participant 90)

Another participant described

> [E]veryone's lives also appear hyper-glamourised on Instagram, which can make me feel insecure about my own life. … I compare myself to those people and wonder what I lack, or why I'm not happy all the time as they appear to be - even though I know that this is a false impression. (Participant 109)

Microblogs were reported unfavourably, functionality difficulties and challenges with the behaviour of others within those platforms, including harassment, were issues raised specific to microblogs. One participant described

> Micro blogs such as [T]umblr … are some of the most unhealth[iest] things I have accessed. They were used in periods of extreme mental distress and in some cases only helped to encourage or fuel an idea to the point of crisis. (Participant 20)

> 'Twitter is a nightmare. I don't engage much there. (Participant 62)

For some, social media require active engagement and considered decision making, about the people and groups followed and consideration about how they use it.

'It depends [on] who you're following and how you're using social media'

Participants reported largely on the positive opportunities and experiences they have had, whilst recognising that in a few specific social media

there was a reliance on the behaviour of others to keep their social media experience from becoming negative or harmful. Moderation was reported as required and appropriate to counter these behaviours. Variations on, it depends, came up repeatedly across the social media types, raising multiple factors about variable engagement within social media. This was demonstrated by mixed reports of SNS being good for connecting, whilst at times being an overload of information. In this case, it depended on what the participant uses SNS for, with the tension captured here,

> I am living in a new city for a postdoc and would be much lonelier without social media. At least half of my adult friends are people I've met online over the past 10–15 years, and I value those friendships a lot. At the same time, the constant influx of news is anxiety producing, and I think social media has contributed to the toxic political environment in the U.S. (Participant 99)

Within discussion forums/message boards' context, the notion was reported by participants as dependent upon moderation and that specific information groups can be useful, whilst also creating anxiety. Similarly for blog users, their experience dependent on them encountering misinformation, pro-suicide or other agendas mentioned; and though blogs were cathartic, the behaviour of others can negatively impact that experience.

Discussion

This study sought to deepen the understanding of the lived experience of young adult social media users about their use of social media. The results guide the ongoing development of evidence informed practice, policy and future research for the benefit of social media users themselves.

Anonymity

The opportunity for anonymity gave participants confidence to engage in social media, and to express themselves and their thoughts, experiences and opinions free from the judgement of others. In prior studies, although there are concerns about the way in which social media anonymity emboldens cyberbullies and trolls (Singleton *et al.*, 2016), for the most part, existing research represents anonymity as allowing people identity protection (Reining *et al.*, 2018), freedom to express themselves, not risk their professional careers (Castro and Andrews, 2018) and to seek information or support (Singleton *et al.*, 2016).

Linking social media and mental health concerns

Participants believed that for people with a pre-existing or vulnerability to mental illness, specific social media platforms were likely to lead to negative experiences and potentially exacerbate their risk of suicide. In previous research, Mars *et al.* (2015) report on results from a UK sample of 3,946 twenty-one-year-olds, demonstrating that suicide-related internet access was common, with higher rates of access amongst those with a history of suicidal or self-harm ideation and that the young adults typically accessed both helpful and harmful sites. Berryman *et al.* (2018, p. 308) found that social media use did not predict any impairment of mental health and suggested that linking social media use to mental health problems was inaccurate and unhelpful. However, they noted a subset of social media behaviour 'vague-booking' did predict suicidal ideation, suggesting this type of social media engagement was a potentially serious risk factor warranting further investigation.

Social comparison

Social media create the direct opportunity for users to view themselves objectively and considering the way that others view them. They can manage their online presence and profiles, whilst viewing the profiles of other social media users. Social comparison is a usual part of adolescent and young adult identity development; however, it can also lead to feelings of inadequacy or insecurity (Singleton *et al.*, 2016; Yang *et al.*, 2018). Whilst social media create opportunities for social comparison to be undertaken, we cannot definitively assert that social media *creates the outcome*.

Meier and Schäfer (2018) researched 385 German speaking Instagram users, aged eighteen to fifty-two years and found that social comparison and envy both played a positive motivational role and were related to improved scores for well-being. Researching a sample of 208 undergraduate students in the USA, aged eighteen to twenty-five years, Yang and Robinson (2018) distinguished between ability and opinion-related social comparison and found that both were positively associated with higher Instagram browsing; furthermore, that poor social adjustment was linked to greater social comparison of ability, whilst better social adjustment was associated with greater social comparison of opinion.

Helpful social media

Participants in this present study identified YouTube as, giving them a greater sense of control over the content they were viewing, helpful for

their mood, a distraction and a form of escapism. Andika *et al.* (2021) report how YouTube became a reliable source of medical information in 2020 throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic, whilst acknowledging the risk of misinformation spreading given the public and easily accessible platform. Considering the educational use of YouTube during the COVID-19 pandemic, Yaacob and Saad (2020) found YouTube to be an accepted form of educational resource during the COVID-19 pandemic. Le Gall *et al.* (2020), reporting on educational engagement of social media, found YouTube to be, the most popular social media, helping users' pass time and linked to lowered stress levels for the participants. Naslund *et al.* (2014) reported on the reciprocal and peer support dynamic for people with a significant mental illness within YouTube, highlighting the support and solidarity enabled by uploading or commenting on content.

Instagram received mixed reviews from participants, with some describing it lifting their mood, whereas others reported comparing themselves to others. For participants experiencing eating disorders, this resulted in increasingly negative self-perception. These results support the existing research highlighting a need for more personalised or tailored use of Instagram. Sampling 253 undergraduate students in the USA, Pittman and Reich (2016) compared use of text-based to image-based social media, finding greater use of image-based social media platforms such as Instagram, was associated with greater reported happiness and satisfaction with life, and lower perceived loneliness. A sample of 195 woman aged eighteen to thirty years recruited from an Australian university, reported that exposure to 'body positive' content on Instagram was associated with improved mood, body satisfaction and appreciation, when compared to impact of exposure to neutral or thin-ideal content (Cohen *et al.*, 2019, p. 1548).

Participants reported the capacity for, communicating with others, organising offline activities and events and intentionally engaging with specific support groups, made Facebook more helpful than other social media. In related research, Ziv and Kiasi (2016) found a positive correlation between Facebook use and psychological well-being in their sample of 200 adolescents aged thirteen to twenty-six years recruited from a community centre in Israel. They concluded that, Facebook provided opportunities to improve social capital, particularly for people lacking in offline confidence and social skills.

In the present study, a participant reported that their personal blogging was more helpful than other social media, enabling them to freely express themselves. Ross (2020) explored blogs in the oncology context and found them to be cathartic for people receiving treatment. Watson (2018) acknowledged the merit of the social support gained through blogging but discussed the potential dilemma for bloggers having to maintain an opinion, to keep the audience of followers or subscribers,

growing and engaged. In the present study, Twitter was favoured from the aspect of humour; however, this was not able to be reinforced by any existing research. Tumblr and Pinterest were considered as forms of escapism, Snapchat for maintaining connections, but again no related literature was found for these.

Harmful social media

Young adults in the present study reported that Instagram fuelled their negative self-perception, self-esteem, body image and promoted unrealistic expectations, by presenting others' lives and bodies as perfect. Results from a related study of 188 female undergraduate students who used Instagram, were suggestive of a potential harm for individuals through comparing themselves to others, particularly when comparing their appearances whilst in competition for intrasexual partners (Hendrickse *et al.*, 2017). In a sample of 630 US undergraduate students aged eighteen to twenty-three years, Wright *et al.* (2020) compared experiences of people using image-based social media platforms such as Instagram to those using video-based platforms, reporting the former were more likely to have decreased well-being, although causality was not established.

Participants in the present study describe scrolling through their Facebook news feed as addictive and fuelling unrealistic expectations of what they could or should be doing. Faelens *et al.* (2021) studied ninety-eight participants aged eighteen to thirty-five years who used Facebook and Instagram, finding that both platforms reduced well-being in the sample. Specifically, Facebook use at time point one was predictive of higher scores for social comparison, repetitive negative thinking and negative affect, as well as decreased scores for self-esteem at follow up.

Other specific sites reported as more harmful than others include Twitter and Tumblr, both reported for their negativity, toxic communication and triggering content for those with mental illness. Sakurai *et al.* (2021) found that use of Twitter was associated with symptoms of distress and loneliness across all three adult age groups eighteen to thirty-nine years ($n = 2{,}543$), forty to sixty-fours ($n = 3{,}048$) and over sixty-five years ($n = 2{,}985$). In the present study, Reddit and 4Chan were briefly mentioned, but merely from the perspective that they were unregulated. We found no prior research linking either to helpful or harmful outcomes.

'It depends [on] who you're following and how you're using social media'

Young adults in the present study report on the largely positive opportunities and experiences they have had, whilst recognising that social

media experiences can be dependent upon how they were feeling and the behaviour of other social media users. Turkle (2008) describes the tethering that occurs between people and social media, interrupting our undervalued attention, and how people become tethered less so to devices, and more so to their extended selves online. It is within social media that people can gain acceptance, validation and affection, through reworking and refining of their identity. The challenge for young adults going through developmental transition periods in their lives is that social media may heighten the ordinary anxieties and challenges faced by young adults (Turkle, 2008). In prior research, Lee and Cho (2018) found in their national sample of 316 adult current Facebook users, those with a fear of isolation were more likely to use social media to compare themselves to others, and to evaluate themselves. They would seek to present themselves in a more social accepted and favourable way, and less likely to present their genuine thoughts and feelings on Facebook, leading to a decreased sense of social support. Yang (2016) distinguished between interactive, passive and active Instagram use in a sample of 208 US undergraduate students, aged eighteen to twenty-five years, reporting that higher loneliness was linked to active Instagram use, whilst interactive and passive Instagram use were associated with lower perceived isolation.

Drawing on data from a global survey of adults looking at digital influence globally, Glaser *et al.* (2018) studied the New Zealand subset of 1,157 people over ten years of age, and reported that social media influenced well-being, notably that if subjects used social media as an extension to offline social networks their mental health benefited. Whilst if the contact was unrelated to offline networks, this could lead to the participant prioritising online connections over offline ones. Lavis and Winter (2020) reported that young people accessing self-harm content on social media are more likely to already be self-harming, and engage social media to seek support, and improve their understanding of their experiences. In a study of 662 US college undergraduate students, Reining *et al.* (2018) found participants had experienced social support whilst engaging social media, whilst also a majority reported that social media use increased their sense of stress.

In a large-scale ($n = 23{,}532$) Norwegian study, with ages ranging sixteen to eighty-eight years, mean = 35.8 years (SD = 13.3), Andreassen *et al.* (2017) found self-esteem to be negatively associated with addictive social media use, though the direction of the relationship is not established. They suggest that people with low self-esteem may prefer online means of communication to others in person, and that some people may use social media in attempt to gain validation and likes from others, to escape their personal feelings associated with low self-esteem. These findings are poignant to the results from the current study given that the

many examples of people framing these as positives opportunities enabled through social media.

Limitations of the study

Our study considers the following limitations. The participant group is not a representative or generalisable sample, and as such only reflects the experience of the individual participants themselves. The themes elicited were not able to be checked with the participants themselves to ensure their accuracy and validity for what the participant had intended, so the interpretation of the responses may be susceptible to the researcher bias. The sample were self-selecting and not randomised in any way; further sampling bias through social media recruitment method, limiting potential responses from people using alternate social media platforms and only finding participants who were still engaged with social media, whilst this may seem logical, there is arguably the absence of perspectives from people with prior use, though now actively disengaged from social media. Additionally, the influence of Facebook's algorithm resulted in an unrepresentative gender mix and will have limited the promotion only to those with interest in social media, well-being and mental health. However, the rate of qualitative responses from male or transgender participants was higher than the female rate and provided rich insights warranting their inclusion.

Implications

This study contributes to the emerging evidence, providing valuable insights into the lived experiences of young adult social media users. The implications for the social work profession elicited from this study are:

- Social media enabling consumers to view day to day lives and images of others, pose a threat to the mental health of consumers with existing mental health concerns. This is particularly implied for Facebook and Instagram, though further research required to understand this phenomenon.
- Video sharing platforms such as YouTube can lead to improved mood for their consumers.
- Future research is needed to develop a guiding framework for individuals, families and professionals to harness the therapeutic potential of social media, whilst reducing the potential harms of social media use for young adults.
- Whilst there are concerns for young adults engaging in social media use, it is unhelpful to simply demonise social media. The

experience for young adults using social media is influenced by the particular social media type, specific platform and the mental health, well-being and behavioural motivations of the collective social media users.

Conclusion

The current study demonstrates that social media may enable multiple opportunities for social work. The results may be used by social work researchers, organisations and practitioners in future to continue to develop an understanding of the many unique perspectives within social media. Through greater understanding and evidence of the dynamic and ever-changing landscape of these media, patients and practitioners can partner together to recognise the threats to client's safety and well-being, alongside the potential opportunities for support and therapeutic outcomes that may otherwise not be realised in traditional offline clinical settings. Further research should seek to develop a guiding framework for individuals, families and professionals to refer to when engaging with, or supporting others who engage with social media. Such a framework would attempt to harness the therapeutic potential of social media, whilst mitigating the potential harms that may can be associated with social media use for young adults.

Funding

This study was supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

References

Andika, R., Kao, C. T., Williams, C., Lee, Y. J., Al-Battah, H. and Alweis, R. (2021) 'YouTube as a source of information on the COVID-19 pandemic', *Journal of Community Hospital Internal Medicine Perspectives*, **11**(1), pp. 39–41.

Andreassen, C. S., Pallesen, S. and Griffiths, M. D. (2017) 'The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem: findings from a large national survey', *Addictive Behaviors*, **64**, pp. 287–93.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2013) '4102.0—Australian Social Trends, April 2013. Young adults then and now'. Available online at: https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features40April+2013 (accessed April 23, 2022).

Berryman, C., Ferguson, C. J. and Negy, C. (2018) 'Social media use and mental health among young adults', *The Psychiatric Quarterly*, **89**(2), pp. 307–14.

Best, P., Manktelow, R. and Taylor, B. J. (2016) 'Social work and social media: Online help-seeking and the mental well-being of adolescent males', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **46**(1), pp. 257–76.

Boddy, J. and Dominelli, L. (2017) 'Social media and social work: The challenges of a new ethical space', *Australian Social Work*, **70**(2), pp. 172–84.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, **3**(2), pp. 77–101.

British Association of Social Workers. (2018) *Social Media Policy*. Available online at: https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/Social%20Media%20Policy.pdf (accessed April 23, 2022).

Caplan, M. A. and Purser, G. (2019) 'Qualitative inquiry using social media: A field-tested example', *Qualitative Social Work*, **18**(3), pp. 417–35.

Carr, C. T. and Hayes, R. A. (2015) 'Social media: Defining, developing, and divining', *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, **23**(1), pp. 46–65.

Castro, A. and Andrews, G. (2018) 'Nursing lives in the blogosphere: A thematic analysis of anonymous online nursing narratives', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, **74**(2), pp. 329–38.

Cohen, R., Fardouly, J., Newton-John, T. and Slater, A. (2019) '#BoPo on Instagram: An experimental investigation of the effects of viewing body positive content on young women's mood and body image', *New Media & Society*, **21**(7), pp. 1546–64.

Cooner, T. S., Beddoe, L., Ferguson, H. and Joy, E. (2020) 'The use of Facebook in social work practice with children and families: Exploring complexity in an emerging practice', *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, **38**(2), pp. 137–58.

Cunningham, S. and Duffy, A. (2019) 'Investing in our future: Importance of postsecondary student mental health research', *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, **64**(2), pp. 79–81.

Dodemaide, P., Merolli, M., Hill, N. and Joubert, L. (2021) 'Therapeutic affordances of social media and associated quality of life outcomes in young adults', *Social Science Computer Review*. https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393211032940 (accessed April 23, 2022).

Faelens, L., Hoorelbeke, K., Soenens, B., Van Gaeveren, K., De Marez, L., De Raedt, R. and Koster, E. H. W. (2021) 'Social media use and well-being: A prospective experience-sampling study', *Computers in Human Behavior*, **114**, p. 106510.

Glaser, P., Liu, J. H., Hakim, M. A., Vilar, R. and Zhang, R. (2018) 'Is social media use for networking positive or negative? Offline social capital and internet addiction as mediators for the relationship between social media use and mental health', *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, **47**(3), pp. 12–8.

Grant, J. E. and Potenza, M. N. (2009) 'Introduction', in Grant, J. E. and Potenza, M. N. (eds), *Young Adult Mental Health*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Hammond, S. P., Cooper, N. and Jordan, P. (2018) 'Social media, social capital and adolescents living in state care: A multi-perspective and multi-method qualitative study', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **48**(7), pp. 2058–76.

Hendrickse, J., Arpan, L. M., Clayton, R. B. and Ridgway, J. L. (2017) 'Instagram and college women's body image: Investigating the roles of appearance-related comparisons and intrasexual competition', *Computers in Human Behavior*, **74**, pp. 92–100.

Keeney, A. J. (2019) 'School social workers' perceptions of ethical dilemmas associated with electronic media use in school settings', *Children & Schools*, **41**(4), pp. 203–11.

Lavis, A. and Winter, R. (2020) '#Online harms or benefits? An ethnographic analysis of the positives and negatives of peer-support around self-harm on social media', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, **61**(8), pp. 842–54.

Lee, E.-J. and Cho, E. (2018) 'When using Facebook to avoid isolation reduces perceived social support', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, **21**(1), pp. 32–39.

Le Gall, C., Le Gall, I. and Jalali, A. (2020) 'Social media usage among university students during exams: Distraction or academic support?', *Education in Medicine Journal*, **12**(3), pp. 49–53.

Mars, B., Heron, J., Biddle, L., Donovan, J. L., Holley, R., Piper, M., Potokar, J., Wyllie, C. and Gunnell, D. (2015) 'Exposure to, and searching for, information about suicide and self-harm on the internet: Prevalence and predictors in a population-based cohort of young adults', *Journal of Affective Disorders*, **185**, pp. 239–45.

Meier, A. and Schäfer, S. (2018) 'The positive side of social comparison on social network sites: How envy can drive inspiration on Instagram', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, **21**(7), pp. 411–17.

Merolli, M., Martin-Sanchez, F. and Gray, K. (2014) 'Social media and online survey: Tools for knowledge management in health research', in *Proceedings of the Seventh Australasian Workshop on Health Informatics and Knowledge Management (HIKM 2014)*, Auckland, New Zealand.

Michaeli, Y., Hakhmigari, M. K., Dickson, D. J., Scharf, M. and Shulman, S. (2019) 'The role of change in self-criticism across young adulthood in explaining developmental outcomes and psychological wellbeing', *Personality*, **87**(4), pp. 784–98.

Naslund, J. A., Grande, S. W., Aschbrenner, K. A. and Elwyn, G. (2014) 'Naturally occurring peer support through social media: The experiences of individuals with severe mental illness using YouTube', *PLoS ONE*, **9**(10), p. e110171.

Pérez-Sabater, C. (2021) 'Moments of sharing, language style and resources for solidarity on social media: A comparative analysis', *Journal of Pragmatics*, **180**, pp. 266–82.

Pittman, M. and Reich, B. (2016) 'Social media and loneliness: Why an Instagram picture may be worth more than a thousand Twitter words', *Computers in Human Behavior*, **62**, pp. 155–67.

Reining, L., Drouin, M., Toscos, T. and Mirro, M. J. (2018) 'College students in distress: Can social media be a source of social support?', *Presentations and Events*, **7**. Available online at: https://researchrepository.parkviewhealth.org/presentations/7 (accessed April 23, 2022).

Ross, E. (2020) 'Researching experiences of cancer risk through online blogs: A reflexive account of working toward ethical practice', *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, **15**(1–2), pp. 46–54.

Sakurai, R., Nemoto, Y., Mastunaga, H. and Fujiwara, Y. (2021) 'Who is mentally healthy? Mental health profiles of Japanese social networking service users with a focus on LINE, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram', *PLoS ONE*, **16**(3), p. e0246090.

Shoebotham, A. and Coulson, N. S. (2016) 'Therapeutic affordances of online support group use in women with endometriosis', *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, **18**(5), p. e109.

Singleton, A., Abeles, P. and Smith, I. C. (2016) 'Online social networking and psychological experiences: The perceptions of young people with mental health difficulties', *Computers in Human Behavior*, **61**, pp. 394–403.

Tan, Y. T., Rehm, I. C., Stevenson, J. L. and De Foe, A. (2021) 'Social media peer support groups for obsessive-compulsive and related disorders: Understanding the predictors of negative experiences', *Journal of Affective Disorders*, **281**, pp. 661–72.

Turkle, S. (2008) 'Always-On/Always-On-You: The Tethered Self', in Katz, J. E. (ed), *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*, MIT Press Scholarship Online, pp. 121–37, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262113120.003.0010.

University of Melbourne. (n.d.) *REDCap at the University of Melbourne*. Available online at: https://clinicalresearch.mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/about-us/health-informatics/redcap (accessed 23 April 2022).

Watson, B. R. (2018) 'A window into shock, pain, and attempted recovery: A decade of blogging as a coping strategy in New Orleans', *New Media & Society*, **20**(3), pp. 1068–84.

Webber, R. and Moors, R. (2015) 'Engaging in cyberspace: Seeking help for sexual assault', *Child & Family Social Work*, **20**(1), pp. 40–49.

Wright, R. R., Schaeffer, C., Mullins, R., Evans, A. and Cast, L. (2020) 'Comparison of student health and well-being profiles and social media use', *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*, **25**(1), pp. 14–21.

Yaacob, Z. and Saad, N. H. M. (2020) 'Acceptance of YouTube as a learning platform during the covid-19 pandemic: The moderating effect of subscription status', *Technology, Education, Management, Informatics: TEM Journal*, **9**(4), pp. 1732–39.

Yang, C. (2016) 'Instagram use, loneliness, and social comparison orientation: Interact and browse on social media, but don't compare', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, **19**(12), pp. 703–08.

Yang, C. and Robinson, A. (2018) 'Not necessarily detrimental: Two social comparison orientations and their associations with social media use and college social adjustment', *Computers in Human Behavior*, **84**, pp. 49–57.

Yang, C. -C., Holden, S. M., Carter, M. D. K. and Webb, J. J. (2018) 'Social media social comparison and identity distress at the college transition: A dual-path model', *Journal of Adolescence*, **69**, pp. 92–102.

Ziv, I. and Kiasi, M. (2016) 'Facebook's contribution to well-being among adolescent and young adults as a function of mental resilience', *The Journal of Psychology*, **150**(4), pp. 527–41.