Social Media and its Effects on College Students

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Abstract

Social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., are commonly used by a majority of college students at schools and universities throughout the country. With the ease and constant accessibility of these social media platforms from having them on smart phones, computers, and sometimes even televisions and gaming platforms, the ubiquitous nature of social media brings up possible struggles in the lives of college students. Is social media having a negative impact on various aspects in the lives of college students? With the advanced types of technology available, students today are able to access social media wherever and whenever they’d like, whether it be in their dorms on their free time or in the middle of a class lecture. This paper will discuss why social media and improper and over usage of it can have negative impacts on different aspects of a college student’s daily life.
Social media is a ubiquitous form of media that connects people around the world in a way that has never before been possible. Easily connecting millions and millions of people, social media creates vast amounts of online communities where people can share and communicate with one another with ease. In research done by the Pew Research Center, they found that 86% of undergrads and 82% of graduate students use social networking sites (Scott, 2011). As the prevalence of social media continues to grow so does its impact on the lives of numerous college students across the country. The prevalence of social media in the lives of college students can have a great impact on academics, social life, professional career, and self-confidence, and even though they can be beneficial, most times it can have a negative effect on these aspects of a student’s life.

The constant prevalence of social media in the lives of college students can hinder their ability to work to their full potential and can easily create distractions for students. With social media appearing everywhere in the everyday lives of college students on phones, computers, and other platforms, it becomes very easy for a student to become distracted. A study from researchers at Baylor University have shown that college students spend about eight to ten hours daily on their cell phones, while certain social media sites are “associated significantly with cell phone addiction” (Wood, 2014). This constant accessibility to social media makes distractions not only within the classroom easier, but in other environments as well. At times that students should be doing homework or studying, they can easily access social media from their phones, computers, or even both! “Students said they find themselves logging into social media when they should be studying” and that “it’s easy to lose track of time while on social media” (Tolly, 2014). This continuous and never-ending accessibility to social media can result in lowered academic performance and as studies by Skiera, Hinz, and Spann have shown, “Facebook
activities during class relate negatively to academic performance” (Skiera, Hinz, & Spann, 2015, p. 54). When a student’s distractions arise in the middle of a class, there focus is no longer on what is being taught, but instead on what’s new on their newsfeed, or who their latest snap is from, or who their newest follower is on Instagram. With countless distraction at hand, it is no wonder that social media, especially in class, can negatively impact a student’s academic performance.

Social media can also have a very large impact on the social lives of students, which in turn can sometimes result in lowered self-esteem and other psychological issues. To begin with, the ease of making social status and popularity a visible numerical value, such as number of likes, friends, posts, retweets, etc., creates large differences and discrepancies in the highs and the lows of social status displayed on social media. In an article from USA Today, some students stated “the number of likes or retweets is used as a tool of verification for acceptance within their group of peers” and that many agree, “the number of ‘likes’ is valued” (Tolly, 2014). This numerical counting of popularity and acceptance is what brings about the large differences in social status and in turn is what affects certain peoples perceived notions of them selves and others. As Vatel states in his research, “social media relationships fosters narcissism in ordinary individuals and encourage narcissistic hypertrophy in those who already possess cluster B traits” (Vatel, 2014, p. 3). What Vatel is trying to get at is that those who regularly use social media are unknowingly creating social and psychological problems. The normal students who use social media are creating false sense of popularity and social status therefore creating a sense of narcissism. The more likes, followers, retweets, friends, etc. that some gets, they more their ego becomes inflated by these senses of false admiration and popularity. The numerical value of popularity on social media also has a detrimental effect on those who already have low self-
esteem and social issues. When these “less popular” people begin to see how few responses and how little acknowledgement their profiles receive in comparison to those that are “popular”, they begin to have even lower self-esteem than they had to begin with. This constant perceived popularity makes it easy for social comparisons to arise through the use of social media. Vogel states “the detrimental effects of frequent Facebook use on well-being are due to upward social comparisons on Facebook” and this is a major problem amongst college students (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014, p. 219). The constant prevalence of social comparisons is where all the self-esteem and image issues derive from. Social media should not be a source of frustration and jealousy for people, especially for college students who have numerous other problems to deal with while in school.

Adding to the false senses of popularity and social status, the types of “friends” that one can have on social media is a big factor in the creation of false senses of popularity. Because the notion of popularity is easily quantifiable, many have the need and “rampant desire to amass friends” and have an “obsession of counting hits, followers, and likes” (Bakardjieva, 2014, p. 374). With this desire to count popularity, it leads some to extremes in order to gain this so-called popularity and social status. For example, there are numerous Facebook users who have thousands and thousands of “friends” on their profiles. Very rarely do these people actually know all of these so-called “friends” and of the others that they do indeed know, very few are good friends with whom they have strong ties to. Many of the “friends” that one accumulates on social media sites are people that they maintain weak ties with, or those who they don’t associate or socialize with very often. With enormous amounts of “friends” on user’s profiles, the line between who is perceived as an actual friend and a “friend” are skewed. Again, a false sense of
perception and notions of popularity are controlled by those who alter their true appearance, which in turn leads to further social comparisons and self-esteem issues.

Along with the stress of social comparisons and social status, students also have to worry about the way they are perceived online and the image they portray on their profiles. Selective self-presentation gives social media users the ability to manage their image online and this can sometimes lead to a sense of false identity. Because social media is a platform where one can monitor everything that is posted and what is said, the image that one presents online is a more perfected version of what one really is. People can read what they are about to say before they post. They can post only the pictures that make them look most “attractive” or most “popular”. With this ability of selective self-presentation, it becomes very difficult to find out who is being true to themselves and who is not. Selective self-presentation also puts stress upon others to do the same. “Students said their anxiety or stress levels are at its high when viewing photos of their peers having fun and compare themselves or their lives to the photos” (Tolly, 2014). When students see others having more fun and having more entertaining lives than they do, they begin to feel the need to be portraying themselves as more fun individuals in order to receive acceptance. This becomes especially true in college with all the events, parties, and social life that surrounds a college student’s daily life. When one finds himself or herself on Facebook or Instagram looking at the countless number of pictures from the latest college party, sporting event, etc., it starts to take a toll on the perceived notions of themselves and others. They begin to feel as if these glorified images of others is what they should strive to be and that again leads to upward social comparisons.

Of course the effects of social media on college students are not all negative. To begin with, social media can create ties for social support and contribute to an increase in social
communication with others, whether it is in the form of weak ties or strong ties. As Kim states “social media use can significantly contribute to lubricating interpersonal communication and diversifying strategies for providing and receiving social support” (Kim, 2014). Social media sites provide easy access to large communities for social support. When someone is in need of support, there is a whole online community to turn to for tangible and emotional support. This quick accessibility to a vast online community makes providing and receiving social support that much quicker and easier. Unfortunately, not all social media users encounter such a friendly and supportive community. Many people don’t receive support from others online and in some instances can be victims of bullying and scrutiny online. Because social media is a less rich form of communication than face-to-face communication, it is much easier to say harsh and hurtful things to others online. It is much easier to bully someone while looking at a computer screen than while looking at the victim face-to-face. There can also be instances where one will turn to social media for support in times of need, and if no support is giving, a sense of being unaccepted and depression can arise. Online support from social media may come easy to some, but to others it proves to be very scarce and nonexistent.

Social media can also make it easier to network and create connections that could help result in future career success. Sacks and Graves state, “Understanding how social network theory underlies social and professional networking allows students to maximize their networks while avoiding career-undermining mistakes” (Sacks & Graves, 2012, p. 85). Social media can help students create a large network of connections that could benefit them in their future career and education paths. There are also certain social media sites, such as LinkedIn, that can aid in the search for jobs while in college. With sites like these, creating online resumes and profiles makes it easier for employers to find candidates for job positions and also makes the job search easier
for the student. The ability to upload profiles with past experience, academic achievements, etc. is a huge plus for all college students. Who wouldn’t want a social media style website that eases the creation of a resume and the search for a job? If a student is responsible and moderates the use of social media while taking advantage of more beneficial sites such as LinkedIn and lowers the use of other sites, then yes, social media in this instance could be extremely beneficial in a college student’s life. Sites such as LinkedIn do provide beneficial advantages to a professional and academic career, but irresponsible use on other sites could hinder and student’s ability to receive a job. A social media user has a constant online profile ingrained onto the Internet that can be seen by almost anyone which is known as someone’s “shadow profile”. Even after deleting something off of one’s profile, it can still be accessed in some form or another. For example, say a student was out partying and had pictures taking of them while they were drinking or performing other unprofessional actions and then they were posted to said person’s profile. Even if that person were to go and delete those photos from their account, there is still an imprint of those pictures on that person’s shadow profile forever. That is why many jobs nowadays perform Internet searches of potential employees to determine if they are suitable work material or not. Past actions on social media, even if they are deleted, can eventually come back to haunt a student when they are on the hunt for a job.

Social media use with college students will most times result in negative effects on their lives. Whether it is academics, social life, professional career, self-confidence, or another aspect of their life; social media can, in one way or another, negatively impact a student’s life. In some cases, social media use can be beneficial to a college student in moderated and responsible use. It can help with social connections and social support, and can also help prepare them for the future
with professional networking and aid in their job search. But in most cases, social media use can negatively impact a student’s life, be it one way or another.
Works Cited


