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The Relationship Between Social Media and Mental Health.

It’s Not All Negatives.

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, social media has become an integral part of life in various countries across the world. However, not enough is being done, in terms of research, to look at how social media affects mental health. This is echoed in some of the literature I will discuss later (J. S.L. Brown, 2018; Pantic, 2014; Naslund et al., 2016). In this paper, I look at the relationship between social media and mental health as it relates to college age students (with a focus on the University of Colorado). The focus stems from the increase in mental illness and mental health problems among college students (“Campus Mental Health,” 2019) and my close proximity to CU. Using interviews I have gathered from expert sources and previously established research I look at more specific mental illnesses and logistical elements of the relationship. I also interviewed college students to get their opinions on how social media affects their own mental health and how they perceive it to affect those around them. With both students (from a discussion standpoint) and professionals (from a research based and investigative standpoint), there is too much focus on the negative aspects of social media and the harm it causes colleges as a whole. While it is important to acknowledge these effects, I also explore some of the benefits social media has on mental health. This paper could be published in the Journal of Communication or the Journal of New Media and Society amongst other places.
The Relationship Between Social Media and Mental Health.

It’s Not All Negatives.

As a senior journalism student at the University of Colorado, Boulder (CU), I have talked a great deal about social media in my four years here. It is a common topic of discussion amongst friends, it has been integral to many of the classes I have taken, and I have discussed it with several professors. For this paper, I will define social media as networking platforms in which people interact with each other and information online. For example, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn are all examples of social media.

After doing preliminary research I noticed a similarity between many of the academic journals I was reading (Naslund et al., 2016; J. Brown, 2018; Pantic, 2014) and what my fellow students thought about social media. Both focused heavily on the negatives despite some acknowledging that there are positives as well. This is particularly apparent when the topic of mental health was brought up. While there are certainly a lot of negatives that I have felt myself and seen in those close to me, it seems as though social media has become a scapegoat for some problems because it is so new and pervasive in our society. It is advancing at an almost unbelievable rate and people don’t know how to deal with it. In this paper, I discuss both the positive and negative effects social media has on mental health while exploring why people think what they think about social media.

Literature Review

During my research for this project, I looked at previously established research in academic journals and news-based articles (including a couple from the University of Colorado itself). The academic journals and research articles provided me with a good understanding of
what was out there regarding the relationship between social media and mental health. The first thing I noticed was it was extremely easy to find research on mental health and it was fairly easy to find pieces on social media as well. However, when it comes to what effects social media has on mental health it was much harder to find good information. This is likely due to how new and still emerging social media is. When it comes to new and complex topics like mental health and social media, compared to more general topics like mental health as a whole, the research just isn’t on the same level in terms of quantity or time spent. I believe this will change over the next few years, especially as the stigma around mental health continues to fade.

Another trend I noticed when seeking out information for my topic was how it seemed the majority of research is on how social media may be bad for mental health or how social media has a large amount of negatives in general (J. Brown, 2018). This mirrors what I have seen when talking to my peers, friends at CU, and beyond. When talking with those around me about social media the focus seems to be on how it can hurt your self-esteem, cause anxiety, and lead to a lot of problems. A common trend amongst students seems to be taking social media breaks or cutting it out entirely because of all the negative effects it can have. I have seen in others and felt in myself many of these negative effects. However, I believe that there is too great a focus on the negatives of social media both in academic/research settings and in more casual discussion spaces. I will explore these negatives because they very real and can certainly be a problem (both right now and moving forward) but I will also bring up some of the positive effects social media can have on mental health. This will be especially prevalent in my own research. As far as selecting articles and literature goes, I choose pieces that really worked well with my topic and areas where I wanted to gain more information. In some cases I was able to find exactly what I was looking for and in other cases I was limited in what I could find. This lead to a good variety
of articles, some of which relate directly to my topic and others, that were more on the outskirts of what I am talking about, helped me expand my project and provided additional depth. While I will break down the literature one-by-one, I want to establish that all of the literature I will bring up has already been read and analyzed for general knowledge about my topic and to get my thoughts together for this section. In addition, there were several articles I either looked at or read through entirely that will not be analyzed in this section because they were not the right fit for my project.

In a journal article titled “Online Social Networking and Mental Health,” Igor Pantic discusses how social media sites may be linked to mental health problems (Pantic, 2014). He looks at studies that have been done that have linked sites like Facebook to mental health issues like depression. Another big focus of Pantic’s review is how social networking sites impact self-esteem. He looks at how some studies show that social media can negatively affect self-esteem while other studies show a boost to self-esteem in certain situations. Pantic also discusses how, when it comes to dealing with and researching the relationship between social media and mental health, there are many controversies, challenges, and problems facing those that wish to delve deeper on this particular topic.

Pantic begins the article by bringing up how “the rapid development of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and so on has caused several profound changes in the way people communicate and interact” (Pantic, 2014). I believe this is especially true on college campuses such as the University of Colorado, Boulder. With social media becoming so widespread and so invasive, students can now spend much of their day jumping from one site to the next, over and over again. This can occur in the comfort of their own home, while they are out to eat with friends, while walking to and from class, and even in many of the
classes they take. According to Pantic, the abundance of extremely available social media at every waking moment allow individuals to interact with each other on a level that has never been seen in human history. Despite the increasingly large number of interactions, “these interactions are shallow and cannot adequately replace everyday face-to-face communication” (Pantic, 2014).

What I think Pantic means by this is that social media provides a large number of interactions with acquaintances, friends of friends, etc. that we would not normally interact with. These interactions, which may be in the form of tagging, likes, sharing, etc. are largely surface level and do not lead to meaningful discourse or build on our relationship with others. While face-to-face interactions can be shallow as well, I believe that there is a much great degree of connection and reciprocation which leads to it being a more meaningful form of communication. I wholeheartedly agree with Pantic’s assessment as someone who grew up with the emergence of social media and has seen it run rampant during my four years at the University of Colorado.

When looking at the established work on the relationship between social media and mental health, both Pantic and I found that not enough has been done yet because social media is still so new. Pantic also highlighted how there was a lack of interpretation and analysis of any research that had been done because most of the research had just come out in the past few years. This is where I hope to contribute. I did qualitative research in order to get people’s thoughts on where the relationship is right now and where it is headed. I applied my own analysis and findings to both the research I have found online and what I found in my interviews.

Pantic brings up how it seems that social media can be very beneficial or detrimental depending on how it is used. For example, using social media to strengthen social ties with those close to you has been shown to improve mental health. On the other hand, behaving negatively on social media and using social media intensively for other purposes can increase loneliness and
depression (Pantic, 2014). This relates heavily to what I found in my interviews with students. The relationship between mental health and social media is filled with both positives and negatives. Some features may seem to boost and help people’s mental health while some of those very same features may cause stress and other negatives to different individuals. I will talk more about these findings from my interview later in the paper.

Consider the following quote by Pantic:

It is probable, however, that the overall impact of SNS on self-esteem is much more complex. Constant self-evaluation on an everyday basis, competition and comparing one's own achievements with those of other users, incorrectly perceiving physical/emotional/social characteristics of others, feeling of jealousy, and narcissistic behavior—these are all factors that may positively or negatively influence self-esteem. Unfortunately, despite several research efforts during the past decade, this issue still remains unresolved, and probably many years will pass before we comprehend the true nature of this relationship. (Pantic, 2014).

Many of these ideas brought up by Pantic are things that I have felt myself or seen in those around me. Feelings like these are what brought me to choose this topic for my thesis. I wanted to investigate how people think social media affects them (through my student interviews), how it affects society as a whole, and more specifically how it affects college campuses and classes (through my expert interviews). One of the most difficult problems facing those wanting to explore the relationship between mental health and social media is assigning causation. Mental health is such a complex issue on its own that when you add social media to the mix it becomes increasingly difficult to see if the problems are caused by social media,
associated with them through related factors, or simply correlated in a perhaps coincidental way. Pantic brings up similar thoughts at the end of his article.

The article “The future of mental health care: peer-to-peer support and social media” by Naslund et al. focuses mainly on the positive effects of social media and peer-to-peer networks on those with mental health issues while still acknowledging that there are many risks involved. This a different perspective from much of the other literature I have read because it looks at those who already have issues with mental health and how they use social media as opposed to how social media can affect the average person's mental health. Naslund et al. found that there can be a huge range of benefits in people with serious mental illness when they use social media to learn and connect with others. These benefits include an increased feeling of social connectedness and belonging, increased empowerment and hope regarding mental health, and greater access to information and support from peers with similar issues (Naslund et al., 2016). There are risks involved especially tied to the anonymity and uncertainty that comes with dealing with others online and through social media. Naslund et. al believes the positives can be seen when those with mental illness overcome obstacles like fear, isolation, social pressures, etc. using social media. They believe this far outweighs the potential risks of those same people using social media.

I also reviewed two articles from the University of Colorado’s official website in order to get a closer look at how the school views itself and how they interact with their students. In an article titled “Healthy Buffs: How to stop the social media spiral” the health and wellness center at CU discussed some of the impacts of social media use. I was surprised to find that they included both positive and negative impacts social media can have. The main positive that they bring is up is how social media allows you to stay connected to friends and family. The negatives
most revolved around comparing yourself to others and how that can lead to stress, anxiety, and other mental health problems ("Healthy Buffs… social media spiral," 2018). In an effort to help students the article details tips on minimizing the negative effects of social media, how to be more positive on social media, and how to recognize if social media is becoming a problem for an individual. I think that this a great step in the right direction for colleges like CU. Despite the article being short it does have some good tips and is pretty well rounded.

Another article published by CU was titled “Chancellor’s Corner: Looking out for one another’s well-being.” In this article, Chancellor Philip DiStefano talks about the rising mental health problem on college campuses (CU included) and what members of this university/community can do to look out for each other (DiStefano, 2019). He explains that mental health services are being used 40 percent more than they were in 2013. While this statistic is staggering, I think that this shows the decrease in stigma around mental health that has occurred over the past several years. Whether social media plays a role in this decrease in stigma is yet to be investigated but perhaps being able to relate to others with similar issues online and through social media is a contributing factor. Overall, I think this article is good for students because it brings up the issue of mental health and shows students how and where they can get help.

In an article titled “Mental Health Problems and Help-Seeking Behavior Among College Students,” Hunt and Eisenberg look at the recent trend of increased mental health problems amongst college students. At least that is what the trend seems to suggest. There is a much greater percentage of college students reporting mental health issues and seeking help for them on college campuses but Hunt and Eisenberg argue that this could be due to a variety of factors (Hunt and Eisenberg, 2010). This could be due to the stigma surrounding mental health being
possibly on the decline. It could also be due to the awareness and encouragement of mental health services on campuses. A similar article on the topic of the mental health of university students by June Brown, titled “Student mental health: some answers and more questions,” discusses both of these ideas. Brown suggests that public concern for mental wellbeing and mental health is increasing, especially on college campuses (J.S.L. Brown, 2018). This was seen at CU in some of the previous articles I looked at. Brown thinks that more long term studies need to done at universities in different environments. This is similar to some of the ideas shared by Hunt and Eisenberg. Right now, colleges are not only adding more services, but also encouraging their students to know where and how to get help. Hunt and Eisenberg suggest that while it may be difficult to assign causality, college campuses are perfectly poised to have a positive impact on mental health in society. This is because they have an abundance of services and resources to combat problems with mental health. Colleges also have research capabilities and the communities/populations to better understand what is going on. I think this could be taken a step further because colleges are also poised to better understand social media (and also how it relates to mental health) for many of the same reasons.

In an article titled “Predicting Depression via Social Media” by Choudhury et al., a clear relationship is shown between certain behaviors on social media and depression (Choudhury et al., 2013). For example, lower social activity and greater negative emotion on Twitter was linked to depression. These connections can be used to predict depression before it occurs in some cases but the greatest problem is accessing the relevant information and data to do this. The authors were optimistic that with advances in technology and better understanding over the issues that relate to social media and mental health that social media can become a tool for predicting, combatting, and preventing mental health issues. Along the same lines, an article titled “Multi-
Task Learning for Mental Health using Social Media Text” explained how deep learning could be used to estimate suicide risk and other factors related to mental health (Benton et al., 2017). While this article was extremely complex and had no definite answers, it did suggest good things for social media being used as a tool for mental health going forward. Some of the machine learning tested in the study showed promising results for predicting different mental health factors via social media and as the technology progresses this will hopefully be a big positive for mental health in society as it relates to social media.

All of this literature combined with my own analysis and curiosities has lead me to develop the following research question. What is the relationship between social media and mental health (with a focus on college campuses) and do people often perceive it to be a negative relationship? This is what I will explore for my qualitative research in the form of interviews.

**Methods**

The main source of new information and research for this project comes from my interviews. I conducted a total of five interviews for my project that explore the relationship between social media and mental health in various ways. With the focus of this project being college campuses (and more specifically the University of Colorado), all my interviewees have had varying degrees of experiences at CU. The audio of each interview was recorded and audio segments from the interviews are included throughout the paper in addition to text-based quotes. My interview subjects were as follows. I interviewed Dr. Stephen Voida in Information Science, Dr. Richard Stevens in Media Studies, and PhD student Tara Walker in APRD as expert sources who have all done some research/field work in areas relating to my topic. Being a PhD student, Walker was able to provide a unique blend of personal experience (from a students point of
view), research experience, and thoughts as a teacher. I also interviewed Richard Williams and Lucas Stackhouse to share their experiences as students at CU. Williams is a current CU student who plans the graduate this year and Stackhouse is a former student who currently works at the CU rec center.

There were a number of factors that led me to choose CU as the focus of my project as opposed to a more general look at the relationship between social media and mental health or an analysis that included other colleges. In my early research, I found an article that showed that CU has the highest rate of eating disorders in the nation (compared to other colleges) based on a 2011 study (Horner, 2012). This is a staggering statistic and definitely was a contributing factor that made my zero in on CU. Additionally, I thought the I could produce the best possible project by keeping my focus close to home. I have a lot of resources and connections at CU which allowed me to select the best possible interviews I could find as opposed to just selecting whoever I could find at other schools (if I had focused on colleges across the nation). Despite this, I still had some difficulties in finding the exactly interviews I wanted. All of my interviewees worked great for my project. However, I tried to get a more even gender distribution amongst my interviewees. I reached out to five different female (possible) interview subjects in an effort to have an even amount of men and women for my project. Unfortunately, none of these potential subjects panned out but I was lucky, with the help of Stephen Voida, to be able to interview Tara Walker.

I interviewed CU professors with some relevant background in social media, mental health, or both in order to get their insights on the topic. The professors were able to provide information on how social media has affected their classes and how they teach. They talked about the differences between how social media affects mental health and how, more generally,
media and technology affected mental health before the rise of social media. I also interviewed CU students to gauge their thoughts on social media and its effects on their own mental health. The students were able to provide personal examples, thoughts, and feelings on the pros and cons of social media. They also talked about how they have seen it affect those around them (mainly their fellow students) and offered some insight on what should be done regarding social media.

In the following paragraphs, I break down some personal and professional details on each of my interview subjects. The expert sources I sought out specifically for their expertise and knowledge on the subject. The professors I interviewed had done research and/or taught in areas that pertained to what I was talking about and I was really curious as to what insight they could provide that I hadn’t thought about. As for the two student interviews, I sought out students who I had seen been fairly active on social media and would have more to say on the subject than the average person.

My first interview subject was Richard Williams and he is currently a senior mathematics major at CU. I first thought to interview Williams after seeing an Instagram post from him a few months ago. The post subtly called out people for going out of their way for likes and followers, essentially pretending to enjoy or do things for Instagram as opposed to them actually enjoying them. Based on what I have seen in this past, Williams has always had strong opinions on social media but this was by far the most vocal example. During the interview, I asked him about how this post affected his following and if he felt any backlash in the real world. Williams told me that although there was a bit of backlash online and he did lose a few followers, he didn’t hear much about it in person. While Williams certainly doesn’t represent everyone, his vast experience with social media and discussing its implications amongst friends was perfect for my project.
My next interview subject was Dr. Stephen Voida, an Information Science professor at CU who comes from a more technology oriented background than any of my other interviewees. He has a PhD in Computer Science and has done work on what the social implications of technology are and what they may look like moving forward. Voida has explored how media and technology factor (both positively and negatively) into things like stress and mental health.

During my interview with Dr. Voida, he suggested that I interview a PhD student that he had done work with named Tara Walker. Voida suggested her as a interview subject because he thought that her input would be valuable to my project given that she has researched and worked on projects dealing with mental health. Walker was a great source for my project because not only did she have experience with the subject, she also shared her point of view as both a student and as a teacher. Walker fitting into both the student and teacher categories was very helpful for my project. Originally, I was planning on interviewing three students and three experts but as my project progressed (with some difficulties finding interviewees) I decided on interviewing two students, two experts, and Walker. Unfortunately, there were some technical difficulties and a mistake made on my part that left me with a 43 minute recording of static instead of an interview. While I did check the microphone prior to the interview to make sure it worked properly, I should have been wearing headphones during the interview to make sure everything was coming out okay. I did take notes during the interview but due to scheduling issues I was unable to re-record another interview.

Dr. Rick Stevens, a Media Studies professor at CU, specializes in technology and social media with a focus on how these two ever changing areas affect culture. I have taken a few classes with Professor Stevens and his thoughts on social media along with his understanding of
how students interact with it (especially in a classroom setting) are what made me reach out to him to hear what he had to say on my topic.

My last interview subject was former CU student Lucas Stackhouse. Following his junior year at CU, Stackhouse dropped out of college due to both mental health and financial issues. After taking time to sort things out, Stackhouse is now working a few different jobs and is closing in on buying his first house. Stackhouse tries to use social media to spread positivity and is probably the most positive person I follow on Instagram. He is a fitness instructor on campus and has some experience with life coaching as well. I sought out Stackhouse because I wanted to hear his thoughts on how social media can affect mental health given how positive he is. I was surprised to learn how much he has overcome in his life thus far. His troubled past that included both drug and mental issues brought him to where he is today and is why he tries to be so positive both in day to day life and on social media.

The logistical elements of my interviews went as follows. Each interview was recorded for audio and ran anywhere from 25-50 minutes long. Each interviewee was asked a set of questions relating to social media, mental health, and their own personal or work experience. In addition to these questions, I talked to each individual about what they brought up over the course of the interview for additional clarification, context, and information. The majority of notes I made were on the audio recordings following the interviews, but I took various notes throughout the interviews as well. This was especially important for the unique ideas and perspectives that the interviewees provided. The notes I took during the interviews along with many of the ideas brought up that I hadn’t thought to look into helped shape and expand my project. I will apply the information, thoughts, and ideas from these interviews to help explore
the relationship between mental health and social media (both positives and negatives) in the next section of my paper.

**Findings and Discussion**

For the findings and discussion section of my paper I will go through each interview one-by-one and look at how they relate both to each other and the established literature on the topic. Being a journalism major and having used extensive amounts of multimedia throughout my time at CU, I thought that it would be extremely beneficial to include a multimedia aspect in my thesis. For all but one of the interviews, I will incorporate audio recordings into my paper to relay a precise description of what the interviewees were thinking at the time. This adds a level of emotion and authenticity that I would have difficulty replicating through typed quotes. Along with the word file of this thesis I have included an audio file with all the clips referenced throughout my paper. I will make note in the paper when to play these clips and the timestamps that correspond with the audio file.

I will begin this section with the interview of PhD student Tara Walker because it is the only interview without audio. Walker gave an incredibly strong interview where she was able to shed light on both her experiences as a student and as a teacher (and soon to be PhD candidate). The most unique perspective that Walker brought up over the course of our interview was her idea of social media as a utility. Walker explained how it seems like social media and the internet are moving closer and closer towards something we could define as essential (or at least really important) to the public. The idea of the internet as a public utility is nothing new. The FCC, politicians, and the public have all been debating this for the past few years as net neutrality became a hot button issue. Merriam-Webster defines net neutrality as “the idea, principle, or
requirement that Internet service providers should or must treat all Internet data as the same regardless of its kind, source, or destination.” (Net Neutrality, 2019). This is extremely important to social media because depending on how social media is viewed, as it continues to emerge and grow over the next few years, its relationship to the public and effect on social media may change a lot. This is also important because it may establish how social media is regulated on a large scale. Walker shared her thoughts that social media is following a trend similar to that of the internet as it becomes more and more widely available and used. I had never once thought of social media as something that could be that important to the public but after Walker explained what she was thinking to me, I completely understood where she was coming from. She thought that more research should be done on social media and there should be more protections for those who use it.

Walker and I also discussed how gender is also a huge part of both social media and mental health. This is an area that Walker has done research on and something I hadn’t really considered prior to meeting with her. It seemed obvious how big of a factor gender is after she explained it to me but in my own examination of the topic I found almost nothing that discussed gender. Perhaps this is due to the lack of research available or how new social media is. One thing I did find that was mentioned both by Walker and in the literature I looked at was the statistic that men are much more likely to commit suicide than women. In the Hunt and Eisenberg article, they specified this statistic to male undergraduates and added that female undergraduates are more likely to have anxiety or depressive disorders (Hunt and Eisenberg, 2010). Walker shared similar statistics with me such as men being more likely to commit suicide and women being more likely to attempt it.
Professor Stephen Voida was the first expert I interviewed and he was extremely informative and helpful throughout the process. Voida talked to me about how social media can be used as an indicator for different positives and negatives of mental health. This includes specific disorders like bipolar, depressive, and anxiety disorders. This can be seen in some of the research I looked at where sites like Twitter are being used to predict depression and other disorders. The amount of time spent on social media can affect things like mood, self-awareness, connection to a community. Voida explained how he’s seen from literature and other research that an increase or decrease in social media use can indicate whether someone with bipolar disorder is moving into a manic or depressive state. This has to do with the behaviors and causes for these states and how they make an individual either want to use social media more or step away from it. This predictive pattern is something I have only heard about (from Voida) and seen (in literature/research) regarding social media but I would be very hesitant to say that it is unique to social media because I have not done enough research in other areas.

Another big point that Voida brought up is how self-esteem can be very closely tied to use of social media. A large part of many different social media platforms is looking at and (depending on the individual) comparing yourself to others. This is echoed in the literature and can be really detrimental to your self-esteem and help spur mental issues but, from talking to students, it seems it can also have the opposite effect depending on a variety of factors. How you use social media and the people you interact with on it are extremely important. Those around you being positive and complementing your posts can have hugely beneficial impacts on mental health and self-esteem. This tricky relationship between the individual and social media is exemplified in the following audio clip from Voida [PLAY AUDIO 00:00-00:28].
Later in the interview, Voida explained that people are always putting their best face forward on social media which can be detrimental to themselves in that they always have to keep up this facade of having a great time and living a perfect life. This can also be problematic for others as people see this facade and compare it to their own real lives. When individuals make these comparisons to those around them living lives that seem glamorous, active, or happy they often take it at face value regardless of the truth behind it. Voida brought up how anonymity can be a big problem on social media. Despite all these major issues and seeming links between them and effects on mental health, it can be very difficult to assign causality without a lot more research being done both on mental health and on social media (especially how they work together). Voida explains this in the following clip [PLAY AUDIO 00:30- 01:00]

Voida has found in his own research that social media can be a really important piece in feeling normal and connected to friends and family. This is especially prevalent in the college dynamic. As individuals themselves or those around them move away from home for college, social media can be a crucial tool in maintaining close relationships with family and friends. These thoughts are highlighted in the following clip from Voida [PLAY AUDIO 01:02-02:52]

After being asked what should be done to benefit social media in terms of its impact on mental health, Voida explained that he thinks platforms can and should take steps to improve the quality of the discourse that occurs on their sites. This is something I wholeheartedly agree with as I believe online civility is a huge issue that seems to be getting worse.

Professor Rick Stevens was a great source to discuss both the positive and negatives of social media’s effect on mental health because he tries to look at things from a distance to see the bigger picture. He does research on how new and emerging media and technology impact both society and culture. Stevens believes that when it comes to social media we are reconfiguring so
much, so fast that a lot of the changes going on are not properly thought out. I see this a lot, in a different way, in the apps that those around me and myself use for social media. An app like SnapChat or Instagram will role out a big update with changes to their site, interface, etc. and people will hate it so a few weeks later it will be rolled back to what it was originally. This happens over and over. Stevens explained to me that there are both positives and negatives but there should be a better understanding of what we are doing going forward. This is true of both we do as users and what the social media sites do as global platforms.

In the following clip, Stevens talks about how behavior in the classroom, students, and himself have all changed as a result of social media [PLAY AUDIO 2:54-4:03]. This is anxiety that Stevens brings up is a great example of how we can feel these effects of social media on our mental health and yet still don’t entirely understand them. This is where more time with the platforms and more research on the subject will be really beneficial over the next few years.

Our lack of understanding regarding the relationship between social media and mental health is similar to how technology and mental health have been misunderstood in the past. Stevens explained how in the past it was thought that mental health would improve as a result of technology because it seemed to be a matter of information. With new technologies like the internet, computers, phones, etc. there was a lot more information out there and much greater access. The thought process of some seemed to be that with all the information on hand mental health would improve. However, with that previous technology and with social media today, more information doesn’t always equate to an improvement in mental health by individuals or by society as a whole. Even with all this information and access to others there are still several ways in which social media is lacking. Many of these deficiencies go unnoticed by the average social media user. For example, when two people interact on a platform like Twitter or Facebook they
may think they have an idea of who the other person is but be completely wrong. Even if both people interacting are who they say they are, both parties still lack the social and physical cues that exist in the real world. It also is really difficult to grasp what others (that you interact with or not) actually know or their experience regarding any given topic. Misinformation (both intended and accidental) is rampant on social media which can cause various problems.

Stevens talks about how the large majority of social media platforms incentivize getting traffic through visits, clicks, likes, shares, view, the list goes on and on. This is both for advertising/revenue generation and to show their hold on the market and user base. This is highlighted in the following clip [PLAY AUDIO 4:06- 5:25]. Stevens explains how this causes platforms to create algorithms and interfaces that encourage increased use “whether or not that’s in the best interest of the user.” For example, a student may have been working on homework for hours and still have hours of work to go. This student decides to take a short break and watch one or two YouTube videos. After watching a short video, YouTube has tons of suggested follow-up videos for the student that are tailor towards his viewing interests and he ends up spending an hour more than he wanted on YouTube. The algorithms that social media sites such as YouTube use make it all too easy to lose track of time and accidentally spend much more time than you wanted on said sites. The same situation could occur with a student who wants to spend a few minutes scrolling through Instagram or Facebook and instead loses track of time, scrolling endlessly for much longer than he thought. YouTube (and other social media sites) aren’t really going to care about issues like these because that just isn’t their logic and it isn’t what their algorithms and sites are designed for. Social media sites are concerned about different things as a social media platform than what we as individuals or a society are concerned about. Social responsibility is creeping up in the design of some of these social media sites but it has only just
started and still isn’t particularly widespread. This is highlighted in the following clip from Stevens [PLAY AUDIO 5:28-6:22].

My interview with CU student Richard Williams was primarily focused on specific social media sites and how they impact people on a personal level with regards to mental health. Williams talked a lot about how sites like Instagram are bad for people’s confidence and self-esteem because you end up comparing yourself to idealized versions of other people’s lives. It seems to Williams that almost everything on Instagram is perfectly curated and setup to show off, even if that isn’t an accurate representation of someone’s reality. He acknowledges that despite knowing this isn’t always how people’s lives really are, he still finds himself comparing his life and social media presence to these superficial glimpses of others’ lives on social media. He talks about the good and the bad of looking to others on social media in the following clip [PLAY AUDIO 6:26-6:48].

Another problem caused by social media is Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). FOMO can occur when an individual sees, all over various social media sites, that everyone seems to be doing exciting all the time. This can lead to fear and anxiety in that individual because they may believe (whether it's true or not) that they are missing out on what everyone else is doing regardless of if they even want to partake in such activities. In addition to anxiety and fear, FOMO can cause increased feelings of social isolation and peer pressure. Williams says this is extremely present on SnapChat. However, Williams feels as though SnapChat is slightly different from a lot of other sites because it is more what you make of it. He thinks that he has the most control over what he sees on SnapChat because you specifically choose whose stories you watch, who you send snaps to, etc. while other sites it seems as if it is other people (based on popularity) choosing for you or there is some algorithm that decides things.
Williams briefly talked about how Grindr, a dating app geared towards the LGBTQ community, is really bad for your mental health in terms of the kind of interactions you can have. Although he is openly gay, Williams didn’t talk much about his sexuality or how that relates to social media and mental health. I didn’t want to press too hard on something he didn’t want to talk about because he shared with me that he was a bit anxious during parts of the interview. He did explain that the way people interact in predominantly homosexual or LGBTQ communities like Grindr is very complex and hard for those outside of such communities to grasp. According to Williams, this could be due the dynamics of such interactions being less public and limited to more confined spaces such as dating apps like Grindr amongst other other contributing factors that he didn’t get in to. Compared to Tinder, another dating app, Williams stated that Grindr is much more superficial and focused on physical qualities like height and weight. Williams cites Reddit as an inherently good social media site that can have loads of benefits for mental health. The large amounts of information and help that can be found on Reddit can be very beneficial for those who lack the means to or are too scared to find help in the real world. In some ways, Reddit can provide support systems and groups (in the form of subreddits) to help with mental health issues. It is also a place where people can see the relatable problems that others are having and either come forward to share similar experiences or at least feel less isolated and alone in their problems. Williams views Facebook as both wholesome and toxic (a view he shares with Stackhouse as discussed below). However, he feels as though there is a lot more misinformation on Facebook when compared to other popular platforms. Williams stressed that with every single social media platform the effects on mental health depend heavily on who is using it and how they are using it. He said that social media is what you make of it and it is a unique, extremely
personal experience for every individual that uses it. He also had this to say about how this changes over time [PLAY AUDIO 6:51-7:14].

When asked what he thought should be done regarding the relationship between social media and mental health, Williams explained that one of the top priorities should be cultivating and raising awareness of the impacts social media can have. Williams explains that he doesn’t explicitly know what causes what or how this all works, as we’ve seen the relationship is very complex, but he believes that just getting out there and making people more aware of what they are doing on social media and what effects this might have on their mental health is a good start. Williams thinks that although we, as a society, are improving but there are still a lot of people out there who don’t understand how behaviors like staring at a social media feed for hours can have an effect on your mental health.

Out of all my interviewees, Lucas Stackhouse was the most open about his past problems and mental issues. He may have had some tough moments in his life but this has brought him to a place of positivity and this is reflected on his social media. Stackhouse explained how since he has started being more positive and spreading this message on social media he has been getting constant messages from friends and followers about how his posts have helped them in different ways. It isn’t just those close to him either. Stackhouse says that he gets positive messages from people he has never met before and probably never will meet. This has lead him to do some life-coaching on social media which he thinks helps both the people he coaches and himself. When asked if he sees social media as more beneficial or detrimental for mental health he responded with the following [PLAY AUDIO 7:15-8:04].

Stackhouse does a lot of comment reading and scrolling through different social media sites in his free time. From this, he has found Facebook to be the most detrimental sites for
mental health because of how “brutal” it can be. He describes Facebook as a place where people will come from every corner of the earth to talk shit about other people and bring other people down. His response to this behavior is just to laugh because these people have nothing better to do with their lives then try to bring others down. Even people you consider to be friends can be discouraging on social media and that is perhaps when it does the most damage. Stackhouse thinks that judgement on social media can be so frustrating because it can be difficult place to express who you are especially if you care what other people think about you.

Stackhouse explains how he deals with stress all the time just like everyone else. He talked to me about drug addiction and how he was in rehab at age 15. From this, along with other tough experiences in his life, Stackhouse learned that there are always going to be problems and negatives in life. He says you can choose to live a life focusing on those things or you can try to do the best you can to be happy and live the life you want despite those problems. A lot of Stackhouse’s friends have died to suicide and drug abuse. He’s been in very very low places mentally and those negative feelings can come back at times but he says he has just learned how to deal with them. Seven years of counseling and therapy to deal with anger and other mental issues was part of that. He now knows how to control his anger and his positivity helps keep him in a better state of mind most of the time. When asked about how to improve the relationship between social media and mental health Stackhouse had the following to say [PLAY AUDIO 8:06-9:22].

Conclusion

From the outside looking in, the biggest limitation of my project would be my very small sample size. This is true of both my own interviews and of the literature/research I reviewed. The
small sample size is something that could have been expanded but it was by design. Instead of doing large-scale quantitative research briefly gleaning little bits of information from more people and sources, I decided to take a more personal, in-depth, and detailed look at the sources and literature I have presented throughout this paper. I felt that this form of research and analysis was more appropriate for my project and the topic I am discussing. Large data sets and vast amount of quantitative research could have their place in this discussion as well but when looking at something that is so widespread and not yet completely understood I wanted to really see what people were thinking on a deeper level.

From my interview with Walker I learned how mental health can affect genders very differently and this is true of social media as well. Both of these areas need to be explored more. Had I met with Walker earlier I would have included questions on how gender relates to social media and mental health in my other interviews. This is an area that definitely should be looked into but just came up too late in my project for me to include anything substantial on it.

Lack of readily available information on the topic of social media and mental health was another big limitation for me throughout this project. I believe this is due to how new the subject matter is and how little research and understanding there is of it at this point in time. Ideally, almost all the literature I looked at would be on both social media and mental health but this just wasn’t possible given how little there is on the relationship. I found a lot on mental health (and a good deal on mental health on college campuses) but the literature on how that relates to social media was lacking in quantity. The sources and research that I did find were very thorough and well backed by evidence. However, when I tried to look further into the references of articles to find more information for my own project, access became an issue as well.
The expert sources of Stevens, Voida, and Walker combined with the personal, student-experience sources of Stackhouse and Williams have given me a lot of insight into the relationship between mental health and social media. I have also gleaned a lot of information as to why people think what they do about this relationship. It seems that the majority of people I talked to agree that the effects of social media are primarily viewed through a negative lens. However, every interview subject talked about how there are various positives (for mental health) of social media. These positives includes being able to better communicate and keep in touch with those close to you and lessened feelings of isolation or fear regarding personal and mental issues. Social media may also be used as a tool to connect with others (both strangers and friends) and overcome obstacles that cause mental health issues. For example, someone with severe social anxiety may find on social media that there are others in a similar position (lessening feelings of isolation) and may use the information those people provide to help deal with his or her own issues. The unifying thought that came up the most throughout my interviews was the idea that social media's effect on mental health really depends on how you use it. For example, Voida and Williams both talked about how comparing yourself to others on social media can have a negative impact on your self esteem. While the effects can be negative, Voida and Stackhouse both brought up how surrounding yourself with positive people who you are close with can boost self-esteem and other areas of mental health. Williams echoed this sentiment in his personal experience when he described how he can at times feel himself using social media in a way that isn’t beneficial and actively working to change that. Being mindful of how you use social media and trying to observe the effects it is having on you are both extremely important. Stevens talked about how easy it is to get lost in social media and lose track of what's going on. In some cases the sites are even designed to facilitate that. I learned from Walker that
social media can affect genders in vastly different ways. The experiences people have with social media can vary a ton based on things factors like gender and in many cases we may not even know what factors affect what and how. With both of those ideas in mind, it is crucial that individuals learn what they can and do what they can to take care of their own social media use and mental health.

From all my research, interviews, and literature review I have found that the biggest issue facing social media and mental health is that no one understands the relationship well enough. This is due to social media being so new and quick to change. It also is because not enough research is being done on this relationship. It is also a very difficult relationship to study because mental health is stigmatized in our society (hopefully that is on the decline) and it seems that the effects social media has on people’s mental well-being doesn’t get enough attention. This may change (I sure hope it does) in the next few years as this topic becomes more explored and researched.
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