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College Students' Use of Social Media and its Effects on Well-being During COVID-19

Virginia Pressly

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College Students' Use of Social Media and its Effects on Well-being During COVID-19

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of Honors Requirements

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in the late 2000s, social media began its ascent into mainstream media. Today, it has become a part of our daily routines. Due to its prevalence and nature, social media has been directly linked to deteriorating mental health in teens and young adults for some time. Many of the studies previously conducted studied Millennials. However, today's generation of young people, Gen-Z, has a very different relationship with social media and the internet. In 2020, when the world was hit with the COVID-19 pandemic and most work and school went virtual, social media became that much more prevalent in our lives. This study examines the effects social media has had on the mental health of Gen-Z college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results show that students have become much more reliant on social media than before the pandemic and showed increased levels of fear and stress as it pertains to their social media consumption. Respondents demonstrated a change in preferred platforms as well.

Keywords: Social Media, COVID-19, Generation Z, Mental Health, Well-being, College Students

DEDICATION

This one's for 2019 me.

You did it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a few people who have made a great impact on my Southern Miss experience. They each left me better than they found me in their own unique way.

To Allyson Staton:

You took a lost girl in the wrong major and led her straight into the field she loves most. I can't ever repay you for that. But consider this my friendship dues. Love you forever, sister.

Of course, I could not consider this thesis completed without acknowledging my ever-so dedicated research partner in crime.

To Dr. David R. Davies:

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Merci pour tout.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

USM	The University of Southern Mississippi
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
Gen-Z	Generation Z defined as being people born between 1997 and 2010
RQ	Research Question
SQ	Sub-question

INTRODUCTION

Since its creation, social media has continued to work its way into our daily routines. Generation Z, however, never knew a world without the internet and social media. Because of this generation's early exposure to the internet, these young people have a very different experience with social media as it pertains to their mental health. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, increased feelings of stress, fear, and anxiety are expected, especially with the changed nature of social media. Given the current circumstances, this raises questions about how Gen-Z has been affected by its social media consumption during the first year of the pandemic.

Generation Z, referred to as Gen-Z or Gen-Zers, has a unique relationship with social media and the internet. Even the oldest Gen-Zers (who are now about twenty-four years old) have never known a world without the internet and have been using social media since childhood. The Pew Research Center defines Generation Z as anyone born in 1997 onward (Dimock, 2021), though there is disagreement as to what ages technically constitute the title "Gen-Z." Even the oldest members of this generation would have been around seven years old when MySpace and Facebook were created in 2004 and about ten years old when the first iPhone was launched in 2007 (McFadden, 2020). With Facebook's minimum age requirement being thirteen years old, these children would have likely been around parents using Facebook long enough to be familiar with it by the time they created their own accounts. In a separate study, Pew Research shows that social media use steadily increased starting in 2005 until 2016 where it has since plateaued (Hitlin, 2018).

Considering Generation Z's early exposure to the concept, it is not unlikely that this generation would have a different experience with social media than that of generations prior. Many negative opinions of social media use were based on research conducted in the earlier days of social media, and thus on a different generation of its users, more specifically, the generation of people born from 1981 to 1996, defined as Millennials (Dimock, 2021).

Within the past few years, the general public has begun to (to use a Gen-Z term) "normalize" Gen-Z's use of social media. In the past, older generations have viewed Millennials' social media use as excessive; however, Generation Z's social media use exceeds even that. A study conducted in 2018 calls Millennials' use of social media "extensive," saying their average amount of time spent on social media networks was 4 hours and 11 minutes (Janicke et. al, 2018). However, according to an article studying Gen Z by *CNN Health* in 2019, teens were averaging upwards of seven hours of screen time a day (Rogers, 2019). As these articles were published in 2018 and 2019, some of the aforementioned teens have now graduated and become college students, which is the demographic with which this study is concerned.

Being a college student comes with anxieties, and mental health struggles abound for many people. The additional effects of social media use can heighten these concerns. One study conducted on late Millennial college students in 2017 showed that 66.4% of survey respondents found social media to be stress-inducing (Drouin, 2018). With the stresses and pressures of college and Generation Z's heightened social media use, it makes sense that many students struggle with their mental health.

While college and social media acted as stressors for Generation Z, the year 2020 introduced yet another factor into the well-being equation—the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of the virus outbreaks, the world, for the most part, was quick to shut down and send everyone home. Everyone's means of communication with one another was reduced solely to a screen. During COVID-19 people, turned to social media and the internet for work, school, and social lives. Due to these new uses of social media and the internet, people experienced a vast increase in screen time. But for Generation Z-aged college students, not much changed in the way of technology. The pandemic caused an increase in this generations' already high screen time. Meanwhile, the nature of social media use shifted from being recreational to being vital. As in-person communication was substantially reduced, social media became one of the only windows into the world outside our homes.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how Generation Z college students' consumption of social media has changed during the age of COVID-19 and the effects these changes have had on their mental health and general well-being. The research will measure students' use of social media before and after the pandemic, as well as their experiences with social media before and after the pandemic. This survey was administered to 78 undergraduate students at The University of Southern Mississippi during the spring semester of 2021.

This study will add to the preexisting literature exploring social media and its mental health effects. As previously noted, many of these studies are focused on Millennials. There is also substantial research on how Gen-Z uses social media. Studies are emerging regarding social media use and COVID-19. This research aims to create the

link between these topics to examine how social media use during COVID-19 has affected the mental health of college-aged members of Gen-Z. The importance of this research is to give insight into the well-being of this generation of college students when the COVID-19 pandemic eventually ends. It is almost inevitable that when we are all able to reintegrate into a normally operating society, people will have to learn to adapt to our “old normal.” If questions are raised as to what aspects of the pandemic played a role in people’s mental health, social media could very well be a large factor. Since this study was conducted almost exactly a year after the start of the pandemic, it will offer an illuminating checkpoint of data for future researchers to examine.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Determining where this study fits into the current narrative into research on social media and its effects on mental health first requires an analysis of what literature is already existing on the topic. The preexisting research can be split into three categories. The first category, “Social Media Use by Millennials,” examines the use and effects of social media on the well-being of the generation predating Gen-Z. As social media has evolved and changed, the research previously conducted may not necessarily still apply. In order to explore why that is, the section titled “Understanding Gen-Z” examines the unique relationship Generation Z has with the internet and social media and how its experience compares to that of its predecessors. Finally, as if Gen-Z’s social media experience was not already unique enough, “Social Media v. Social Distancing” examines the use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic and how its users have been affected. The purpose of this study is to create a link between these existing areas of literature to better understand the particular demographic of Gen-Z college students and their relationship with social media in the years 2020 and 2021.

Social Media Use by Millennials

As mentioned in the introduction, much of the existing literature regarding social media and college students was written before 2015, and thus the data collected concerned a different generation entirely— Millennials. Millennials were the first generation to fit into the prime demographic for social media users, being teenagers and young adults as new networks were created. Considering the 2010s, when a large amount of data was collected on social media use, high school students, college students, or recent grads were almost all Millennials. According to a study conducted at the

University of Hawaii in 2013, more than half of the percentage of students found their relationship with social media to be “detrimental” to their study habits (Pinyerd, 2013, p. 52). However, when asked about their relationship with social media and self-image, the results varied. Some students saw social media as a means of self-expression and found it beneficial to their well-being, while others saw it only as a “highlight reel” and as a means of comparison and found that it lowered their self-esteem (Pinyerd, 2013, p. 52-53).

The effects that social media has on its users differ not only among generations, but also among people. Each person has his or her own experience and perceives his or her own relationship with social media differently. That being said, as greater use of social media has become more commonplace, the implication is that extensive use was not always as common. In 2011, a survey conducted at Johnson & Wales University found that 88% of students, both undergraduates and graduates, spent more than two hours a day on social media sites but had an inherently negative relationship with the platforms (Wang et al., 2011, p. 9). Given the nature of the study, the “relationship” described is that of students and social media as it pertains to academic performance. Social media is described as providing students with a new way to make friends and relax. However, the study recognizes the need for balance between social media use and academic study (Wang et al., 2011, p. 9). This idea lends itself to the notion that, while the direct relationship between students and social media may have been good, the effects it had on their lives and academic performance may be the real cause for concern.

An important aspect to take into consideration when exploring the relationships of Millennials with social media is the type of media being consumed. The purpose of using

these platforms can be directly related to the effects on its users. A 2018 study analyzed Millennials' exposure to what was labeled as "inspiring" content on social media and determined its relationship with well-being. The study determined that relationships created online typically stay exclusively online and do not become face-to-face interaction. Therefore, the study found no correlation between users' consumption of online inspiration and offline connectedness (Janicke et al., 2018). Our study exists in stark contrast to Janicke et al. in 2018 on two fronts. The first is that the year 2020 reduced society to existing almost exclusively online. These circumstances have now directly tied online and offline connectedness to one another in ways they were not before. This newfound link is because, for many people, online connectedness became all that was available. The second is that the 2018 study is examining Millennials, while this study explores Generation Z.

Much of the literature in this area was based on data collected from Millennials. A great example is a study titled "Social Media & Mobile Internet Use Among Teens and Young Adults" in 2010. The data collected surveyed social media users ages 12 and up (Lenhart et al., 2010, p. 13). At the time, the very oldest members of Gen-Z would have just barely been 12 years old, thus not even old enough to meet the relatively common minimum age of 13 for social media registration. This begs the question of how Gen-Z uses social media, as this generation was not included in a number of earlier studies.

Understanding Gen-Z

In order to understand Gen-Z's use of social media, one must first understand Generation Z's unique relationship with social media and the internet. To succinctly describe this relationship, Marc Prensky refers to Generation-Z as "digital natives" and

all other generations as “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1-2). These titles effectively sum up the fact that Gen-Z has never seen a world in which the internet did not exist. These teens and young adults have grown up surrounded by technology, the internet, and social media, whereas older generations adopted these things into their preexisting lifestyles. Given this phenomenon, it can only be expected that Gen-Z would have a relationship with social media and the internet that is considerably different from that of those who came before them.

Given Generation Z’s exposure to social media in high quantities, it can be expected that their well-being is affected that much more significantly. The reality of the situation is easily explained in an article in *Psychology Today* that addresses the results of two un-cited studies, published in *Nature Human Behavior* and *Clinical Psychological Science* respectively, exploring social media use in youth. The first study, a survey of 350,000 teens, “found that digital technology use was negatively associated with mental health. But the association was miniscule, explaining at most 0.4 percent of variation in well-being. By comparison, regularly eating potatoes had a similar negative association with mental health” (Frye, 2019). If this study is correct, social media may have fewer negative effects on Generation Z as expected. The second study compared social media use and depressive symptoms in adolescent girls. While the assumption may have been that higher social media use caused more depressive symptoms, the truth was actually the opposite. Greater depressive symptoms were indicators of greater social media use (Frye, 2019).

An article written in 2015 eerily foreshadowed life in and after 2020 said. “Social interest may affect Generation Z youth who are no longer becoming trained in the

nuances and art of conversation, and lack of face-to-face communication will potentially inhibit their development of skills to connect socially and in person (Turner, 2015).” An article from *Wall Street Journal* speaks to the same issue, but on a more positive note. The article quotes Emma Havighorst as saying, “For my generation, interacting online is still ‘in real life’” (Mims, 2019). The contrast of these two articles in comparison to the limited social interaction of 2020 demonstrates the reason that Generation Z’s circumstances are so unique. What Turner feared for Gen-Z became reality for the entire world, and, as Havighorst pointed out, Gen-Z still sees online interaction as real life.

Social Media v. Social Distancing

In an interesting twist of fate that no one could have been adequately prepared for, in March of 2020 when COVID-19 cases sky-rocketed worldwide, people everywhere were sent home indefinitely with the expectation that life would carry on as normal, *virtually*. Businesses that were able to began working from home, and schools and universities closed and adopted virtual learning practices. For many people, this abrupt change caused a decline in mental health and with valid reason. Physician and epidemiologist Sandro Galeo of Boston University observed, “The mental health impact is the next wave of this event, and I am worried we’re not talking about it enough” (Sarner, 2020). But in addition to what was already shaping up to be one of the biggest international health crises the modern world had ever seen was the shift in the nature of social media. Social media had become less of a recreational time killer and more of one of the few methods of staying connected with one another in a time where people physically could not. People were also being constantly bombarded with often scary information about COVID-19, in what was referred to in many cases as the “infodemic.”

It can only be expected that people would experience a decline in mental health not only due to the pandemic, but due to a shift in social media use as well.

A study with a mean age of 32 years old was conducted near the beginning of the pandemic. In April 2020 this study found a high correlation between high social media exposure and mental health problems (Gao et al., 2020, p. 8). It only makes sense that with the changed nature of social media, especially at the start of the pandemic, people's increased social media use would lead to negative feelings and decreased mental health. Consuming media regarding an international health crisis day in and day out is sure to cause feelings of fear and anxiety.

Living through a time with a constant threat of danger and illness brings with it fears and worries. As much as social media perpetuates those fears and worries, it also has the ability to alleviate them. Social media is in a unique position to both harm and help depending on how it is used. As is the case with many things, anything can be good in moderation. Social media during a pandemic is no exception. One article from early 2020 states the importance of avoiding the consumption of excessive information but also of misinformation (Wiederhold, 2020).

The American Psychological Association recommended utilizing social media as a means of staying connected to rid oneself of anxieties and fears surrounding the pandemic (American Psychological Association, 2020). Aside from it providing a means of connection to alleviate concerns, in most cases social media was one of the only ways people *could* stay connected with stay-at-home orders and mandated quarantines in place.

There are also concerns that cannot yet be measured as far as the COVID-19 pandemic is concerned because it is ongoing. A study conducted in Italy found that 5.1%

of people actually showed symptoms of PTSD, and 48.2% of people showed evidence of decreased psychological well-being or mental health (Favieri et. al, 2020). While not directly linked in the study, it did also demonstrate that 39.8% of respondents experienced an increase in social media consumption.

After thorough analysis of existing literature in each of the preceding areas, it is clear that there is a distinct lack of information regarding American college students' social media habits and their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is likely largely due in part to the fact that the pandemic is still ongoing, and research may not be fully conducted and completed until the pandemic's conclusion. The purpose of this study is to bridge the gap between what is already known about Generation Z and their social media habits, and how this younger generation has been affected during a global health crisis. As for the continuation of the pandemic, circumstances are subject to change. However, this study documents the social media habits of Generation Z exactly one year into the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted to measure the change in mental health in college-aged Gen-Zers as it relates to their use of social media during what has been, as according to the immunologist Dr. Anthony Fauci, “the most disastrous pandemic that we have experienced in our civilization, in over 102 years” (Rosenthal, 2020). The researcher hypothesized that with students’ increased social media use during the pandemic, there will in turn be a decline in their mental health. The research conducted is quantitative so as to best measure and compare students’ mental health as well as their social media habits before and during COVID-19.

Research Questions

The overarching question throughout this study is: “What are the effects of social media on Gen-Z aged college students during COVID-19?” Seeing as how this pandemic is the biggest public health crisis in a century and the first that the world has experienced while having access to social media, it can be expected that it will take an additional toll on its users. Given social media’s history with affecting the mental health of adolescents and young adults, as well as Gen-Z’s differing social media experience, how much are college students being affected by social media use in the pandemic, if at all? In order to best answer these research questions, the researcher designed the survey around a set of research questions and sub-questions.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How has college students’ use of social media changed during COVID-19?

Sub-question 1(SQ1): Do people spend more time on social media now than before COVID?

Sub-question 2 (SQ2): What platforms do people use the most now in comparison to before COVID?

Sub-question 3(SQ3): What do students use social media for?

Hypothesis 1: Taking into account that most (if not all) college campuses closed during the Spring 2020 semester and sent students home for fully virtual learning, students would be isolated from their “normal” group of friends and have an altered schedule that kept them at home for long periods of time. Because of the nature of the current events of 2020 and 2021, students can be expected to turn to their usual social media platforms with different intentions. For example, a person who used Twitter primarily for humor and entertainment pre-COVID may turn to Twitter for news updates during the pandemic. We hypothesize that under these circumstances, students would see an increase in their social media usage in general and a shift in what platforms they prefer and for what reasons they turn to social media.

Research Question 2 (RQ 2): What is the effect of these changes?

Sub-question 1 (SQ1): Do students find social media satisfying? Why or why not?

Sub-question 2 (SQ2): Are students more or less happy, stressed, productive, informed, etc., due to their current use of social media?

Hypothesis 2: Considering the circumstances listed above and if Hypothesis 1 is supported, we hypothesize that students whose social media use has been significantly altered will have seen a decline in their mental well-being.

Participants

Participants in this study were all undergraduate students at The University of Southern Mississippi. The survey was distributed primarily by email in March and April 2021, but it was also distributed by various social media platforms. In order to garner the most accurate data, the survey was distributed to students enrolled in different courses and involved in different student groups. The respondents varied greatly in background, demographic, and worldview. At the survey's conclusion, there were 78 complete responses.

Instrumentation

A survey with questions regarding student social media use and well-being was administered to undergraduate students at USM in the Spring semester of 2021. This survey was given using Qualtrics, an online survey software at the link https://usmuw.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bOzEDkIXkrSy4XH (See Appendix A). All responses were confidential and anonymous. Each respondent had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the consent form (Appendix A) before beginning their data submission. At the conclusion of the survey, there were demographic questions to ensure that a variety of people were represented in the data. There were also final questions about respondents' personal experience with COVID if they wished to share. This study was approved by The University of Southern Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (Appendix B). The following chart demonstrates how survey questions were analyzed to answer research questions.

Table 1 Research Questions

Research Questions (RQ)	Survey Questions
RQ1: How has college students' use of social media changed during COVID-19?	
SQ1: Do people spend more time on social media now than before COVID?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, how much time would you say you spend on social media in a day? (<i>Less than an hour, 1-2 hours, 3-4 hours, 5-6 hours, more than 6 hours</i>) Daily, about how much time did you spend on social media before COVID-19 (March 1, 2020)? (<i>Less than an hour, 1-2 hours, 3-4 hours, 5-6 hours, more than 6 hours</i>)
SQ2: What platforms do people use the most now in comparison to before COVID?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Please rank the following from 1 to 5 by the amount which you use them. 1 being the most and 5 being the least. (<i>Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat</i>) Please rank the following from 1 to 5 by the amount which you used them before COVID-19. 1 being the most and 5 being the least. (<i>Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat</i>)
SQ3: What do students use social media for?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Please select all reasons you used social media before COVID-19 (March 1, 2020). (<i>To read news, to procrastinate, for fun, to kill time, to keep up with friends, to communicate</i>) Please select all reasons you used social media in the last three months. (<i>To read news, to procrastinate, for fun, to kill time, to keep up with friends, to communicate</i>)

Table 1 (cont.)

RQ2: What is the effect of these changes?	
SQ1: Do students find social media satisfying? Why or why not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please indicate how much you experience each of the following as they pertain to your current use of social media (within the last three months). 1 being very little, 5 being neutral, and 10 being significantly. (<i>Happiness, stress, anxiety, entertainment, fear, humor</i>) • Please indicate how much you experienced each of the following as they pertain to your use of social media prior to COVID-19 (March 1, 2020). 1 being very little, 5 being neutral, and 10 being significantly. (<i>Happiness, stress, anxiety, entertainment, fear, humor</i>)
SQ2: Are students more or less happy, stressed, productive, informed, etc. due to their current use of social media?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think that social media causes you to procrastinate more? (<i>yes or no</i>) • Do you feel that social media keeps you informed with what is going on in the outside world? (<i>yes or no</i>) • Have you ever stopped using one or more social media platforms for a “mental health break”? (<i>yes or no</i>) • Have you found yourself distancing yourself from social media or relying more on social media during COVID-19? (<i>Very distant, somewhat distant, same amount of use, somewhat reliant, much more reliant</i>)

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Once the survey had been conducted, the researcher was able to draw conclusions on the effects of social media on the respondents' well-being as it pertains to social media during COVID-19. The participant pool was a sample of convenience for ease of survey distribution. There appear to be no negative effects on the data due to the sample studied. In order to best analyze this data, the researcher first noted the respondents' demographics.

Demographics

Of the 100 recorded responses, only 78 were answered completely. The data analyzed comes from the completed responses. This survey was distributed via email and social media to current undergraduate students at The University of Southern Mississippi, ages 18 to 23. The most unique aspect of the data collected is that despite the distribution methods, the respondents were overwhelmingly women, with 72 out of 78 respondents identifying as female and the remaining six identifying as male. Finally, the classifications of the respondents were six freshmen, 20 sophomores, 22 juniors, and 28 seniors, with two respondents leaving the question unanswered.

Data

Research Question 1: How has college students' use of social media changed during COVID-19?

Hypothesis 1: We hypothesize that under these circumstances, students would see an increase in their social media usage in general and a shift in what platforms they prefer and for what reasons they turn to social media.

The researcher hypothesized an increase in students' use of social media, a shift in their preferred platforms, and a change in the reasons students use social media. This data was collected by asking respondents to essentially answer many of the same questions twice— first pertaining to their use before COVID and second pertaining to their use during COVID. For the sake of this survey, “pre-COVID” was defined as being before March 1, 2020 and “during COVID” was defined as being “in the last three months.” The survey was first distributed in March 2021, so the “during COVID” data pertains to March, February, and January 2021. The following table demonstrates the respondents' time spent on social media before and during the pandemic.

Table 2 Social Media Use

	less than an hour	1-2 hours	3-4 hours	5-6 hours	more than 6 hours
Q1: On average, how much time would you say you spend on social media in a day?	n = 1 1.28%	n = 8 10.26%	n = 36 46.15%	n = 24 30.77%	n = 9 11.54%
Q2: Daily, about how much time did you spend on social media before COVID-19 (March 1, 2020)?	n = 1 1.28%	n = 21 26.92%	n = 40 51.28%	n = 14 17.95%	n = 2 2.56%

The research hypothesized that Generation Z college students would demonstrate a change in time spent engaging with social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 2 measured how much time students spent using social media during and before COVID-19. The data shows a general trend of time spent on social media increasing during the pandemic. Forty-two percent of respondents used social media five or more hours a day in the last three months as compared to the 20.51% with usage of five hours

or more pre-COVID. There was one respondent who measured less than one hour a day both before and during the pandemic. This is possibly due to a personal preference to limit social media use more so than a result of COVID-19.

Given that most universities, The University of Southern Mississippi included, became fully virtual in early 2020, students spent significantly more time at home and inevitably spent significantly more time on social media. Time spent in a classroom, in the student union, traveling to and from campus, going out with friends, and many other factors were replaced by time spent alone at home. It only makes sense that this time was filled with social media. This data shows that there has been a significant increase in time college students spend on social media.

Figure 1 Preferred Platforms Visual Q3

Please rank the following from 1-5 by the amount which you use them. 1 being the most and 5 being the least.

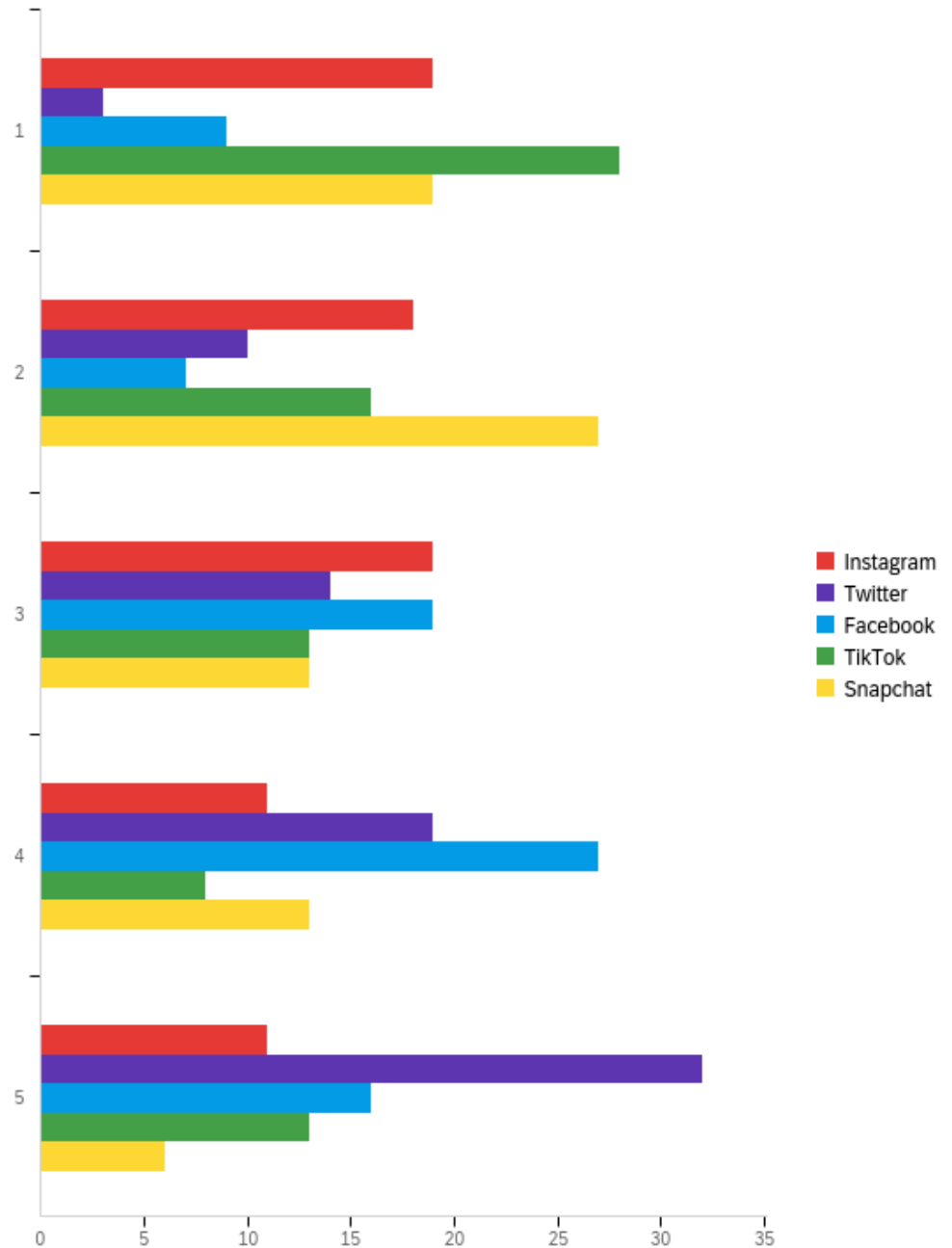


Figure 2 Preferred Platform Visual Q4

Please rank the following from 1-5 by the amount which you used them before COVID-

19. 1 being the most and 5 being the least.

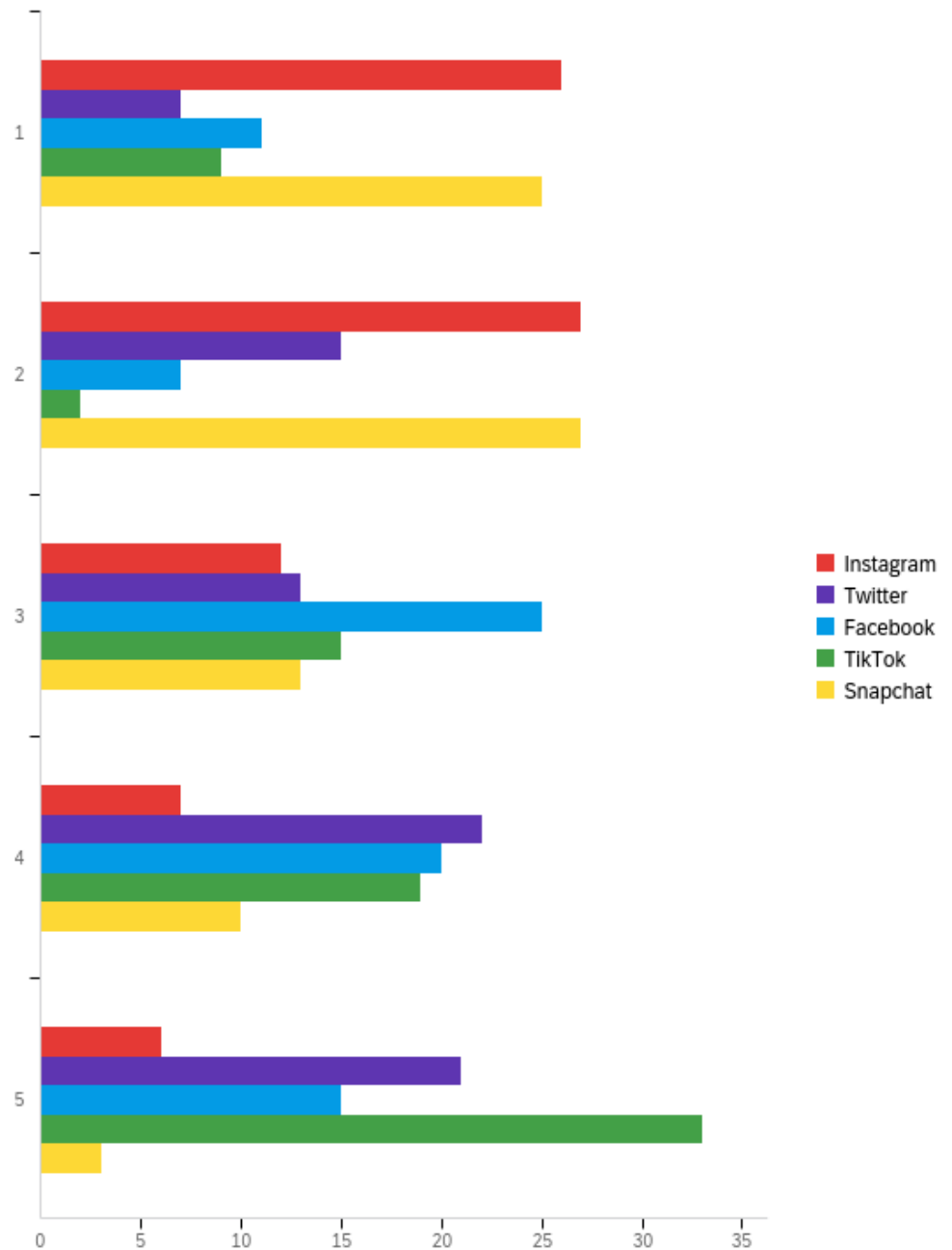


Table 3 Preferred Platforms Numerical Q3

Please rank the following from 1-5 by the amount which you use them. 1 being the most and 5 being the least.

*Significant data is marked by green cells.

Q3	1	2	3	4	5
Instagram	n = 19 24.36%	n = 18 23.08%	n = 19 24.36%	n = 11 14.10%	n = 11 14.10%
Twitter	n = 3 3.85%	n = 10 12.82%	n = 14 17.95%	n = 19 24.36%	n = 32 41.03%
Facebook	n = 9 11.54%	n = 7 8.97%	n = 19 24.36%	n = 27 34.62%	n = 16 20.51%
TikTok	n = 28 35.90%	n = 16 20.51%	n = 13 16.67%	n = 8 10.26%	n = 13 16.68%
Snapchat	n = 19 24.36%	n = 27 34.62%	n = 13 16.67%	n = 13 16.67%	n = 6 7.69%

Table 4 Preferred Platforms Numerical Q4

Please rank the following from 1-5 by the amount which you used them before COVID-19. 1 being the most and 5 being the least.

*Significant data is marked by blue cells.

Q4	1	2	3	4	5
Instagram	n = 26 33.33%	n = 27 34.62%	n = 12 15.38%	n = 7 8.97%	n = 6 7.69%
Twitter	n = 7 8.97%	n = 15 19.23%	n = 13 16.67%	n = 22 28.21%	n = 21 26.92%
Facebook	n = 11 14.10%	n = 7 8.97%	n = 25 32.05%	n = 20 25.64%	n = 15 19.23%
TikTok	n = 9 11.54%	n = 2 2.56%	n = 15 19.23%	n = 19 24.36%	n = 33 42.31%
Snapchat	n = 25 32.05%	n = 27 34.62%	n = 13 16.67%	n = 10 12.82%	n = 3 3.85%

Figure 1 and Table 3 contain the visual and numerical components of the same data, the responses for Q3. These both measured the social media platforms students prefer during the pandemic by asking them to rank Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and TikTok by how much they use them. TikTok was ranked first by 35.90%, followed by Snapchat with a second-place ranking from 34.62% of responses. There is a tie in the data for the platform ranked third, with Instagram and Facebook both receiving 24.36% of responses. However, Facebook had a significantly higher percentage of 34.62% of responses ranking it fourth, thus ranking Instagram in third. Finally, Twitter was ranked last by 41.03% of respondents.

The responses for Q4 pertaining to preferred platforms before COVID-19 are measured in Figure 2 and Table 4. This particular set of data was unique because the platform that was ranked first the most was Instagram, with 33.33% of respondents ranking it as such. However, when comparing only Instagram's rankings, it was ranked second the most, by 34.62% of respondents, hence the darker shaded cell. This also caused a tie in the second-place overall rankings between Instagram and Snapchat. However, considering Instagram was ranked first the most overall, Snapchat will be ranked second. Snapchat is followed by Facebook with 32.05% of responses ranking it third, Twitter ranking fourth with 28.21% and TikTok with 42.31% ranking it fifth.

This data measured the shift in students' preferred platforms after the start of the pandemic. The most notable change was TikTok usage shifting from being ranked last before COVID-19 to be ranked first during the pandemic. According to the Apple App Store, TikTok is an entertainment app. The platform's role as a source of entertainment explains the significant change. In a time of significant worry and stress, it makes sense

that students would increase their use of an app that provides strictly entertainment. TikTok's content consists of short videos up to a minute long and live videos. This type of content can easily be created at home, meaning its users were able to continue creating and producing their normal content. This jump may also be partially in part to the external factor that is TikTok's growth. An article from TechCrunch demonstrates TikTok's exponential growth, especially in late 2019 and early 2020 (Liao & Shu, 2020).

Another notable shift in preference was that Snapchat overtook Instagram in ranking during the pandemic. Snapchat, by nature, is an app used to message friends and post short stories while Instagram is predominantly used for sharing photos and videos of what is happening in one's life. Given the nature of each of these platforms, it comes as no surprise that an app for communication ranked second place in a time where in-person communication was not available. The lowered ranking of Instagram could also be attributed to people staying home and not having anything worth sharing. While TikTok boasts a wide range of content, Instagram often contains photos of events, travel, and friends, all of which were restricted during the pandemic. These circumstances could have contributed to students' decreased use of the platform.

Table 5 Purpose of Use

Q5: Please select all reasons you used social media before COVID-19 (March 1, 2020).

Q6: Please select all reasons you used social media in the last three months.

Q5 and Q6	To read news	To procrastinate	For fun	To kill time	To keep up with friends	To communicate
Q5: Before COVID	n = 36 46.15%	n = 64 82.05%	n = 75 96.15%	n = 61 78.21%	n = 75 96.15%	n = 65 83.33%
Q6: During COVID	n = 57 73.08%	n = 60 76.92%	n = 69 88.46%	n = 65 83.33%	n = 71 91.03%	n = 69 88.46%

The final aspect of measuring how students' social media use has changed is determining the reasons students use social media. Table 5 measured for what reasons students were using social media before the start of the pandemic and as it progressed. The data showed a significant increase in the number of students who turn to social media for news, increasing from 46.15% before COVID-19 to 73.08% during COVID-19. There were also slight increases in respondents using social media to kill time and to communicate. Interestingly, there were slight decreases in both using social media to procrastinate and to keep up with friends. The decrease in students using social media to procrastinate could simply be that during the pandemic, they had less to procrastinate on. With the university moving completely virtual many students' workloads could have been cut back significantly, giving them less work to avoid. The drop in students using social media to keep up with friends may also be attributed to the idea that students were not posting as much on social media for their friends to keep up with.

The responses to each of these survey questions give insight as to how students' overall use of social media has changed. The numbers show that during the COVID-19 pandemic, students have used social media more frequently, experienced a change in platform preference, and begun using social media for different reasons. This data supports the hypothesis that students would experience increased social media usage and a general shift in platform preference and their reasoning for use.

Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Research Question 2: What is the effect of these changes?

Hypothesis 2: We hypothesize that students whose social media use has been significantly altered will have seen a decline in their mental well-being.

As Hypothesis 1 was supported, the second portion of this research hypothesized that with an increase in social media use, students will demonstrate a decline in well-being. A thorough review of literature showed that social media had detrimental effects on members of older generations. Literature also indicates that social media during the COVID-19 pandemic led to decreases in mental health but did not specifically delve into Generation Z. This study was designed to determine social media's effects on Gen-Z while simultaneously navigating an international health crisis. This change in well-being was determined by asking respondents a series of questions evaluating their feelings towards their social media use before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 6 Response to Use

Q7: Please indicate how much you experience each of the following as they pertain to your current use of social media (within the last three months). 1 being very little, 5 being neutral, and 10 being significantly.

Q8: Please indicate how much you experience each of the following as they pertain to your use of social media prior to COVID-19 (March 1, 2020). 1 being very little, 5 being neutral, and 10 being significantly.

	Happiness	Stress	Anxiety	Entertainment	Fear	Humor
Q7: During COVID-19	6.09	5.40	4.95	8.18	2.69	8.00
Q8: Before COVID-19	6.64	3.84	3.69	8.05	2.09	7.55

The second half of this research concerns students' well-being as it pertains to their social media use. Table 6 measured the feelings that students experienced while using social media before and during the pandemic. The variables students were able to choose from included an equal number of reactions that were positive (happiness, entertainment, humor) as it did reactions that were negative (stress, anxiety, fear). This table shows the mean score for each reaction. The most significant changes were increases in both stress and anxiety. Given the increase seen in students using social media for news, these increased negative feelings are unsurprising. Additionally, while too small of a difference to be significant, it is interesting to note the slight decrease in perceived happiness during the pandemic. It is also important to note that while there was an increase in negative feelings, students' documented significantly more experiences with positive feelings of happiness, entertainment, and humor.

Next, students were asked a series of yes or no questions. Each question pertained to a different aspect of perceived well-being.

Table 7 Social Media Perception

	Yes	No
Q9: Do you think that social media causes you to procrastinate more?	n = 70 89.74%	n = 8 10.26%
Q10: Do you feel that social media keeps you informed with what is going on in the outside world?	n = 73 93.59%	n = 5 6.41%
Q11: Have you ever stopped using one or more social media platforms for a “mental health break”?	n = 46 58.97%	n = 32 41.03%

The data in Table 7 measured students’ perception of their social media use in broader terms. Rather than specifying before or during COVID-19, the survey asked generalized questions about their social media experience. As expected, an overwhelming majority of respondents reported that social media reduced their productivity. At the start of the survey RQ1 asked if students used social media to procrastinate, and over 75% agreed before and during the pandemic. RQ2 finds that while it may not be the intention to use social media to procrastinate, 89.74% of respondents felt that social media caused them to procrastinate.

Question 10 asked if students believed that social media keeps them informed. Much the same as Q9, 93.59% of respondents answered yes, while the response to RQ1 found that 73.08% of students turn to social media for the news during the pandemic. These discrepancies may be due to the students’ perceptions of “the outside world.”

Perhaps the outside world to them includes their friends and family who would not be included in the earlier question regarding news intake.

Finally, Q11 directly asked if students have ever taken a “mental health break” from one or more social media platforms. As social media has grown, so has the practice of stepping away from it when necessary. Unsurprisingly, 58.96% of respondents have taken a “mental health break,” directly indicating their experience with the negative effects of social media.

Figure 3 Reliance on Social Media Visual

Q12: Have you found yourself distancing yourself from social media or relying more on social media during COVID-19?

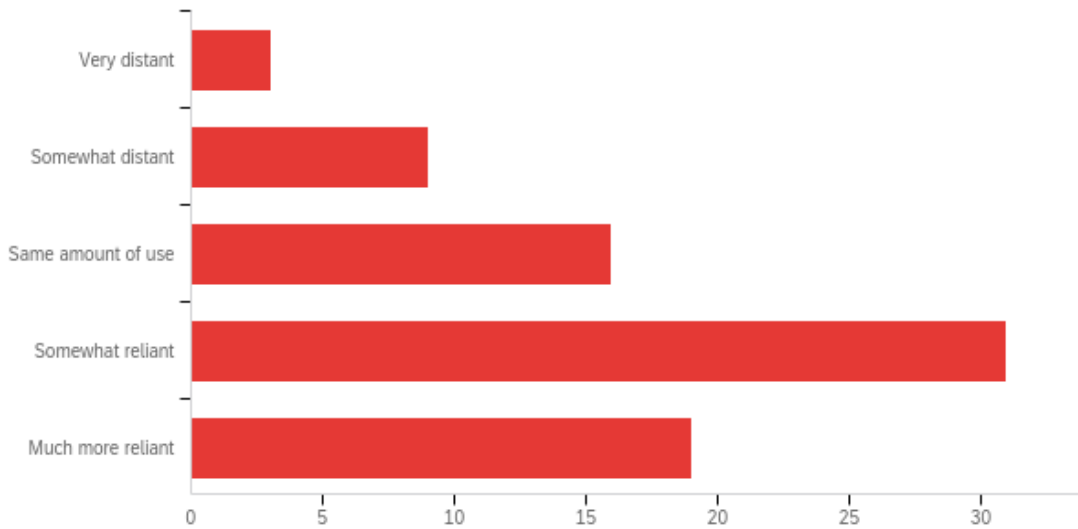


Table 8 Reliance on Social Media Numerical

Q12: Have you found yourself distancing yourself from social media or relying more on social media during COVID-19?

	Very distant	Somewhat distant	Same amount of use	Somewhat reliant	Much more reliant
Q12	n = 3 3.85%	n = 9 11.54%	n = 16 20.51%	n = 31 39.74%	n = 19 24.36%

While the first question of this survey asked students to identify how much they used social media, Q12 asks how much they rely on or distanced themselves from social media. Figure 3 and Table 8 measured reliance on social media in both visual and numerical aspects. Time spent engaging with social media is more conscious than reliance on social media. While some students may use social media upwards of six hours a day, that could simply be how they choose to spend their time. However, it could also be because they have grown dependent on social media, be it for communication, entertainment, etc. Since that Q12 gave the option of “same amount of use,” students who consider their social media use voluntary rather than vital were able to sort themselves into that category. The data shows 20.51% of respondents with the same amount of use as before COVID-19. But most interestingly, 64.10% of respondents found themselves reliant on social media, 24.36% categorizing themselves as being much more reliant. As the means of communication became limited due to the pandemic, it is no surprise that over half of the survey respondents find themselves reliant on social media. For many people, social media is likely one of the only points of contact with the world outside

their homes. Given that students' social media use shows significant negative effects, this reliance on social media possibly contributed to their negative experience.

The researcher hypothesized that with an increase in social media use, students would exhibit a decrease in well-being. The data from Q7 and Q8 shows an increase in negative feelings associated with social media use. The following questions, Q9-Q11, were in reference to general social media use unspecific in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the responses to Q12 are subjective. A reliance on social media could be perceived as positive or negative depending on the individual's nature of social media use. However, as students saw increased negative effects, this reliance on social media is inherently negative. As Hypothesis 1 is supported, the data shows the students experienced a decrease in perceived well-being as it pertains to their social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hypothesis 2 is supported.

CONCLUSION

After thorough analysis of the data from this survey, the study found that Gen Z college students exhibited changes in their social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the effects of their social media use had negative effects on their well-being. Since the beginning of the pandemic, students demonstrated an increased use of social media with over half of the respondents averaging three hours a day or more spent engaging with social media. As their amount of use changed, so did the platforms they turned to. As a result of a global health crisis that caused increased stress and anxiety, students turned towards entertainment and communication platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat more than they turned to photo-sharing platforms like Instagram.

In addition, this study found that the effects of their social media use had increased negative effects during the pandemic. The data showed a significant increase in stress and anxiety as it pertains to social media use during COVID-19. Finally, over half of the respondents found themselves more reliant on social media during the pandemic than before. Given that students reported more negative feelings associated with social media use, this reliance on social media likely contributed to students' decreased well-being.

In conclusion, in the wake of the biggest global health crisis in a century, Generation Z college students have turned to social media even more so than before. As the expectation was that their “extra” excessive social media use would not bode well for their mental health, they did experience increased negative feelings. However, their positive experiences still outweighed the negative ones. While social media has harmed,

it has also entertained, and while it may not always be to our benefit, it has also kept the world together in a time where we could not. Generation Z is no exception.

Limitations

This research was limited in that it utilized a convenience sample. The pool of respondents was drawn exclusively from undergraduate students at The University of Southern Mississippi. This target demographic was college students who are a part of Generation Z. This study was also limited in the questions posed to respondents. Students' experiences could have been affected by external factors that were not identified by the survey.

Implications for Further Research

This study lends itself to future research on a few fronts. First, there is the potential for a similar study being conducted after the eventual conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic. This data was collected almost exactly a year into the pandemic and is subject to change as this event progresses.

Secondly, while this study examines college-aged Gen Z specifically, younger Generation Z may have had a different experience with social media use during the pandemic. Even college-aged Gen Z is at the very top of the age range considered part of Generation Z, with 2019 seniors being among the first Gen Z students to receive degrees. Members of Gen Z still in high school are even more technologically savvy than current Gen Z undergraduates and thus may be affected differently.

Potential future research could explore other external factors that may have influenced the nature of social media in 2020 and 2021. For example, 2020 was an election year that resulted in polarizing opinions and ultimately violence. The summer of

2020 brought racial injustice and opposing protests. Aside from a global pandemic, this time period had many significant events that could have played a role in students' social media consumption. While there were many external factors that could have contributed to negative experiences, other external factors could have contributed to positive experiences as well.

Finally, future research could take a more in-depth look at what type of content people prefer. While this study measured platform preference, students could also have unique content preferences. The platforms studied could contain different content depending on an individual's use. Twitter, for example, may provide funny tweets and photos for one person but politics and news for another. A more in-depth look into individual content consumption could be beneficial in better understanding reactions to and effects of social media. In today's day and age, the further evolution of social media is inevitable, and the long-lasting effects of COVID-19 have not yet been explored, as the pandemic is still ongoing. These circumstances can provide opportunities for future research into social media's role in a pandemic and how it affects different generations.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY

Social Media & COVID-19

Start of Block: Introduction

I This survey is being conducted to assess students' current social media use and its effects and how it compares to social media use and its effects before the COVID-19 pandemic. Your help is greatly appreciated!

Please answer each question to the best of your ability.

All responses will remain anonymous and the link to the consent form is attached below. Please review it and indicate if you wish to continue.

This survey has been approved by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board. Protocol number (IRB 21-71)

Thank you!

II Click to write the question text

III Participant Consent

☐

Check this box if you consent to this study. (1) |

End of Block: Introduction

Start of Block: How has college students' use of social media changed during COVID-19?

Q1 On average, how much time would you say you spend on social media in a day?

- ☐ less than an hour (1)
 - ☐ 1-2 hours (2)
 - ☐ 3-4 hours (3)
 - ☐ 5-6 hours (4)
 - ☐ more than 6 hours (5)
-

Q2 Daily, about how much time did you spend on social media before COVID-19 (March 1, 2020)?

- ☐ less than an hour (1)
 - ☐ 1-2 hours (2)
 - ☐ 3-4 hours (3)
 - ☐ 5-6 hours (4)
 - ☐ more than 6 hours (5)
-

Q3 Please rank the following from 1 to 5 by which the amount you use them. 1 being the most and 5 being the least.

- _____ Instagram (1)
 - _____ Twitter (2)
 - _____ Facebook (3)
 - _____ ~~TikTok~~ (4)
 - _____ Snapchat (5)
-

Q4 Please rank the following from 1 to 5 by which the amount you used them before COVID-19. 1 being the most and 5 being the least.

- _____ Instagram (1)
- _____ Twitter (2)
- _____ Facebook (3)
- _____ ~~TikTok~~ (4)
- _____ Snapchat (5)

End of Block: How has college students' use of social media changed during COVID-19?

Start of Block: For what purposes do students prefer certain platforms?

I The following questions are in regards to your reasons for using social media before COVID-19 and during COVID-19.

Q5 Please select all reasons you used social media before COVID-19 (March 1, 2020).

- ☐ To read news (1)
 - ☐ To procrastinate (2)
 - ☐ For fun (3)
 - ☐ To kill time (4)
 - ☐ To keep up with friends (5)
 - ☐ To communicate (6)
-

Q6 Please select all reasons you used social media in the last three months.

- ☐ To read news (1)
- ☐ To procrastinate (2)
- ☐ For fun (3)
- ☐ To kill time (4)
- ☐ To keep up with friends (5)
- ☐ To communicate (6)

End of Block: For what purposes do students prefer certain platforms?

Start of Block: What is the effect of these changes?

Q7 Please indicate how much you experience each of the following as they pertain to your current use of social media (within the last three months). 1 being very little, 5 being neutral, and 10 being significantly.



Q8 Please indicate how much you experience each of the following as they pertain to your use of social media prior to COVID-19 (March 1, 2020). 1 being very little, 5 being neutral, and 10 being significantly.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Happiness ()											
Stress ()											
Anxiety ()											
Entertainment ()											
Fear ()											
Humor ()											

Q9 Do you think that social media causes you to procrastinate more?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q10 Do you feel that social media keeps you informed with what is going on in the outside world?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q11 Have you ever stopped using one or more social media platforms for a "mental health break"?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Q12 Have you found yourself distancing yourself from social media or relying more on social media during COVID-19?

☐ Very distant (1)

☐ Somewhat distant (2)

☐ Same amount of use (3)

☐ Somewhat reliant (4)

☐ Much more reliant (5)

End of Block: What is the effect of these changes?

Start of Block: Demographics and COVID

I The next few questions are about you and your experience with COVID. Feel free to answer as many or as few as you are comfortable with.

Q13 Please indicate your age.

- ☐ Under 18 (1)
 - ☐ 18 (2)
 - ☐ 19 (3)
 - ☐ 20 (4)
 - ☐ 21 (5)
 - ☐ 22 (6)
 - ☐ 23+ (7)
 - ☐ Prefer not to say (8)
-

Q14 Please indicate the gender you identify with.

- ☐ Male (1)
 - ☐ Female (2)
 - ☐ Transgender female (3)
 - ☐ Transgender male (4)
 - ☐ Gender variant/non-conforming (5)
 - ☐ Other (Please specify) (6) _____
 - ☐ Prefer not to say (7)
-

Q15 What is your classification?

- ☐ Freshman (1)
 - ☐ Sophomore (2)
 - ☐ Junior (3)
 - ☐ Senior (4)
-

Q16 Do you consider yourself a more positive or negative person?

- ☐ Extremely positive (1)
 - ☐ Somewhat positive (2)
 - ☐ Neither positive nor negative (3)
 - ☐ Somewhat negative (4)
 - ☐ Extremely negative (5)
-

Q17 Have you or someone you are close to tested positive for COVID?

- ☐ Yes (6)
 - ☐ No (7)
 - ☐ Prefer not to say (8)
-

Q18 How has your daily life been affected by COVID?

- ☐ None at all (1)
 - ☐ A little (2)
 - ☐ A moderate amount (3)
 - ☐ A lot (4)
 - ☐ A great deal (5)
-

Q19 How much has your mental health changed during COVID?

- ☐ None at all (1)
 - ☐ A little (2)
 - ☐ A moderate amount (3)
 - ☐ A lot (4)
 - ☐ A great deal (5)
-

Q20 Please indicate your level of concern for COVID.

- ☐ Very unconcerned (1)
- ☐ Unconcerned (2)
- ☐ Neither unconcerned nor concerned (3)
- ☐ Concerned (4)
- ☐ Very concerned (5)

End of Block: Demographics and COVID

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of Research Integrity



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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.
- Face-to-Face data collection may not commence without prior approval from the Vice President for Research's Office.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-21-71

PROJECT TITLE: College Students Use of Social Media and its Effects on Well-being During COVID-19

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Journalism, Public Relations,
RESEARCHER(S): Virginia Pressly, David Davies

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

CATEGORY: Expedited

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: March 11, 2021

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

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