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The Use of Social Media by Young Adults and Adolescents in Relationship to Anxiety: A Systematic Literature Review

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Introduction

Anxiety is described as persistent worry and tension that may induce debilitating mental and biophysical changes in the body (American Psychological Association, 2019). Between 2001 and 2003 22.3 percent of U.S. young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 experienced some form of anxiety (National Institute of Mental Health, 2017). About 4.4 million children between the ages of 3 and 17 in the U.S. were diagnosed with anxiety in 2016 (Ghandour et al., 2019). Consequences of anxiety include relationship struggles and the inability to function at school and work (National Institute of Mental Health, 2018). Mental disorders, such as anxiety, may also impede developmental and cognitive milestones in youth (Ghandour et al., 2018). Currently, there are mixed findings on whether social media use negatively impacts youth's mental health (Pew Research Center, 2018). One study found that young adults who received a high number of social media posts from online friends experienced increased anxiety-depressive symptoms over time (Swezdó et al., 2012). In contrast, a study of 471 undergraduate college students found no significant relationship between social media use and negative mental health outcomes (Berryman et al., 2018). The purpose of this systematic literature review is to identify, review, synthesize, and analyze current evidence on the relationship between adolescent and young adult use of social media and anxiety.

Methods

Databases Searched: PsychINFO

Keywords: anxiety, social anxiety, anxiety disorders, fear, worry, social media, facebook, twitter, instagram, snapchat, tumblr, social networking, adolescents, teenagers, young adults, teen, youth

Limiters: Adolescents (13-17), young adults (18-29), English language, and a timeline of 5 years

Inclusion Criteria: Adolescents 13-17 years old; young adults 18-29 years old; anxiety as an outcome; primary research studies; quantitative studies; social media as the independent variable

Exclusion Criteria: Studies not in English; dissertations; systematic literature reviews; qualitative studies; mention of pre-existing medical diagnosis in target population

- A quality appraisal tool was developed using Polit and Beck's guide to critiquing quantitative studies (Polit & Beck, 2017, p.102). The highest attainable score was 17. 5 studies scored between 15-17 points and 3 scored between 13-14 points.

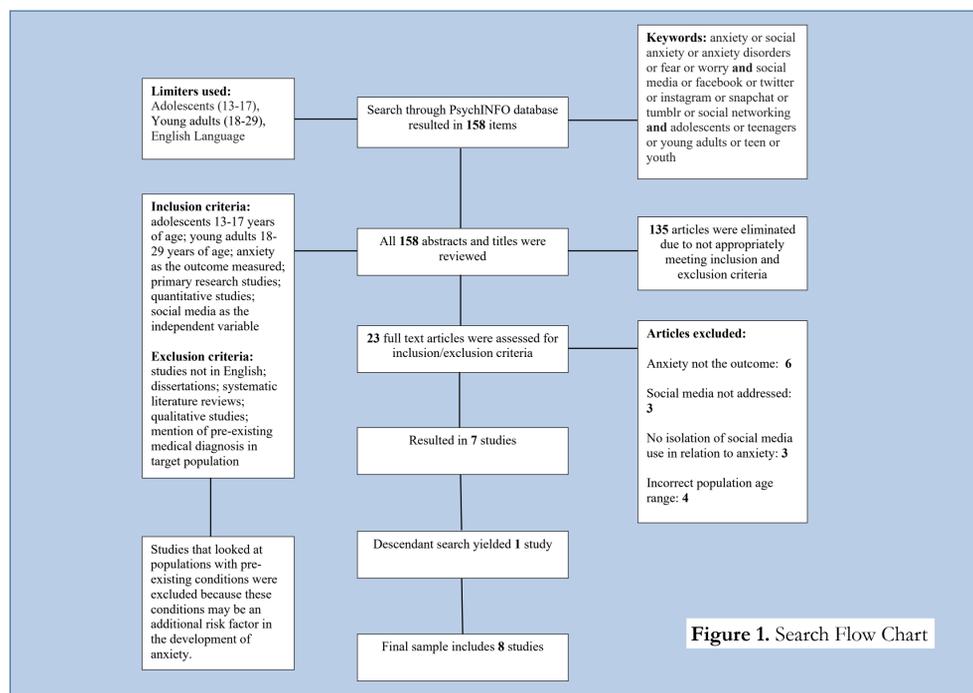
Discussion

The results of this review indicate a relationship between social media use and anxiety. Three studies showed a relationship between time spent on social media and anxiety, suggesting that increased time spent on social media may be linked to anxiety. Two studies failed to find a significant relationship between types of social media and anxiety, which might further support quantity of time as being a key factor in the development of anxiety. Another study found a correlation between the number of sites used and anxiety, possibly implying that belonging to more sites increases the time spent on social media. This may further support frequency of use as being a strong moderator of anxiety. Excessive social media use may indicate that youth need to ensure that they are not missing out on new content (e.g. FOMO) or want to remain socially relevant in comparison to peers. To better support time as a key factor, future research is needed to determine if anxiety leads to more frequent social media use, or if increased use leads to anxiety. Additional data may aid in the creation of policy that guides standards of care, such as screening instruments and use recommendations. These standards could be used by nurses to assess for social media related anxiety and provide action plans to reduce use. Limitations of this review include researcher inexperience and limited time.

Results

All eight studies in the final sample were quantitative, non-experimental, and primary research designs. Six studies were descriptive and two were a descriptive correlational design.

- Two studies looked at types of social media in relationship to anxiety. Jones et al. (2018), found no significant increased risk of anxiety in 24-26 year old's using LinkedIn compared to 19-23 year old's (OR=1.19, 95% CI [0.83,1.71], p=0.97). Ilakkuvan et al. (2018), found no significant differences between social media use classes (e.g. creative) and anxiety in young adults (p=0.669).
- Three studies found a relationship between time spent on social media and anxiety. Barry et al. (2017), found a significant weak positive correlation between the number of times adolescent's checked social media and anxiety (r=0.21, p<0.05). Vannucci et al. (2016), found that higher daily social media use was significantly predictive for anxiety in young adults (B=0.74, 95% CI [0.59,0.90], p<0.001). Thorisdottir et al. (2019), reported a significant weak positive correlation between time on social media and adolescent anxiety (r=0.207, p<0.001).
- Barry et al. (2017), discovered that parent and adolescent reports of the number of social media accounts used were significantly moderately positively correlated with adolescent anxiety (parent report: r=0.45; adolescent report: r=0.38, p<0.001). Primack et al. (2016), did not find a significant relationship between the number of social media sites and anxiety (p=0.38).
- Thorisdottir et al., (2019) found that active and passive use of social media had significant weak positive correlations with adolescent anxiety (active: r=0.141, passive: r=0.135, p<0.001). Khodarahimi and Fathi (2017), found that young adults had significantly higher anxiety than adolescents when using social media messaging (i.e. active use) (t(437)=-2.82, young adults mean: 27.01, adolescence mean: 22.69, p<0.002).



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