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Exploring the Impact of Online Social Platforms on Social Connectedness Among UC Berkeley Undergraduates

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Exploring the Impact of Online Social Platforms on Social Connectedness Among UC

Berkeley Undergraduates

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	2
Title Page	1
Table of Contents	2
Abstract	3
Introduction	4 - 5
Methodology	6 - 7
Limitations	8 - 9
Results	10 - 18
Socialness	10 - 12
Self-Identification	13 - 15
Connectedness	15 - 18
Case Reviews	19-21
Jay M. Marlowe’s article “Digital Belongings: The intersections of social cohesion, connectivity, and digital media.”	
Chia-Chen Yang’s article “Instagram Use, Loneliness, and Social Comparison Orientation: Interact and Browse on Social Media, But Do not Compare” discusses this topic.	
Discussion	22 - 23
Conclusion	24
References	25

ABSTRACT

Keywords: social media, social connectedness, social isolation

With social media's prevalence in recent decades, the relationship between social media and the well-being of its users has always been under debate—with some believing that social media tends to have a negative impact and others believing that social media has a positive impact. This systematic review aims to determine how social media contributes to feelings of social isolation or connectedness among college students at the University of California, Berkeley.

We conducted a university-wide survey to determine how college students feel about using social media. Using cluster analysis and the data analysis program R, we determined that most college students feel socially connected while using social media. While some past research articles support this theory, most do not discuss the ways in which college students generally tend to feel socially connected on social media platforms. Our paper explores specific factors contributing to college students' social connectedness on various social media platforms.

INTRODUCTION

Recent technological advances have allowed people to communicate with one another more immediately throughout the past decade. The prevalence of studies showing how social media interactions contribute to feelings of social isolation or connectedness is increasing (Primack et al.). Results show that people who reported spending the most time on social media—more than two hours a day—had twice the odds of perceived social isolation than those who said they spent a half hour per day or less on those sites (Hobson). Most of the current research on this topic discusses how an increase in social media uses leads to an increase in feelings of social isolation or a decrease in feelings of social connectedness; however, there have been a few studies showcasing the opposite, that more social media use leads to a decrease in feelings of social isolation or an increase in the feeling of social connectedness.

Social isolation is defined as being alone or lacking meaningful social interactions. It often leads to feelings of loneliness and disconnectedness, characterized by the absence of relationships with others and little to no social support or contact (Veazie et al.). On the other hand, social connectedness refers to a sense of belonging and positive social relationships, fostering a supportive community and college students' emotional well-being (Allen et al.)

Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are social networking platforms that allow users to upload media that can be organized by hashtags so people viewing their posts can relate to them. These three social media platforms are widely used among undergraduate students at the University of California, Berkeley, aged 18-25. Facebook is a social networking site that allows people to connect and share with family and friends online, Instagram is a free photo and video sharing app, and Twitter is a free social networking site where users broadcast posts known as

tweets. Twitter is also a microblogging platform that allows users to share brief thoughts and news and engage in real-time conversations.

The American Psychological Association states that social media use is associated with “positive between-person associations of friendship,” with features such as “close friends” on Instagram allowing users to share their stories exclusively with a selected group of contacts, fostering a more private and intimate connection to help maintain “friendship closeness” (Pouwels et al., 2021). However, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, social media has also been linked to cases involving “cyberbullying, ‘Facebook depression,’ sexting, and exposure to inappropriate content” (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), potentially leading to feelings of social isolation.

This paper explores how social interactions on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat contribute to feelings of social isolation or connectedness in college students in the U.S., focusing on those at the University of California, Berkeley. Our group collected information about the students' feelings regarding social connectedness or isolation at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) through an online and anonymous survey distributed randomly and received 310 responses. This research will impact college students, professors, administrators, and other professionals who interact with these students. This work will provide insight into the modern ways social media impacts students' lives and identities.

METHODOLOGY

To determine how online social interactions on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat contribute to feelings of social isolation or connectedness, our team prepared a Google Form to assess the students' sense of connectedness through different aspects. We concluded that a survey format would be appropriate for our data collection because it would effectively receive answers to questions that gauge student's engagement on social media. For example, our questionnaire had questions where students' answers would be selected on a scale (i.e., 5 = agree and 1 = disagree). Our questionnaire included 29 questions about various social media usage and perception questions, including which social media platforms students used, students' time on each platform, and feelings related to social media, such as self-identification, socialness, and connectedness. To ensure that our respondents are from UC Berkeley, we asked them a question that all UC Berkeley students would be able to answer: Which floor of Moffitt is the quiet floor?

The survey was distributed among undergraduate students at UC Berkeley. To ensure that the questionnaire reached a diverse and representative population, we distributed the questionnaire to various representative populations, including student groups via student organizations, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Slack, as well as in-person communication with students.

Our method features several exclusion and inclusion criteria or specific characteristics that determine a participant's eligibility to be included within our study sample. Four exclusion criteria—qualities that separate these groups from our sample—utilized were non-UC Berkeley students, UC Berkeley graduate students using social media less than 4-5 times a week, and ages beyond 17-25 years. Our inclusion criteria are gender, ethnicity, ages 17-25, and UC Berkeley undergraduate students. We created these criteria to study UC Berkeley students solely to garner

a representative sample of UC Berkeley undergraduates. Had we opened our survey to other college students, most of the responses would have been from UC Berkeley students, biasing the data collection and results.

Additionally, we decided on the age range of 17-25 as we are undergraduate students and hence could sample other undergraduate students more conveniently. Our approach of sampling only UC Berkeley undergraduates is prevalent as we are all UC Berkeley undergraduates who maintain social interactions through social media. Moreover, we are all interested in learning how social interactions on social media platforms contribute to how connected we are to students our age. We received 310 responses from students ages 17 to 25. We used graphs and the coding language R to analyze the data we collected from our Google Form.

LIMITATIONS

Our collection method was subject to various limitations, including distribution, availability, and exclusion constraints. With only seven members on our research team, the distribution range of our survey was limited. Advertising the survey to tens of thousands of students posed significant challenges. Our study collected a total of 310 responses. However, UC Berkeley's undergraduate population comprises around 45,000 students as of 2021. This significant difference may be attributed to our data collection method, which was entirely voluntary.

Furthermore, our survey revealed that over 67.4 percent of our respondents identified as female, while only 30.3 percent identified as male. In contrast, only 54 percent of UC Berkeley undergraduates identify as female ("University of California - Berkeley Diversity: Racial Demographics & Other Stats"). This suggests a discrepancy between our data and UC Berkeley's student body demographics. Moreover, 61 percent of our respondents identified as Asian, whereas CollegeFactual reports that only about 44 percent of UC Berkeley undergraduates are Asian ("University of California - Berkeley Diversity: Racial Demographics & Other Stats"). Additionally, most of our responders were undergraduate freshmen (48.1%).

Additionally, the availability of our survey was restricted to those with access to a device and internet connection, as our collection method was entirely online. Unfortunately, some students had trouble accessing our survey because you had to be signed in from a Berkeley email address on the device used to scan a QR Code.

To address these limitations, we solicited feedback at the campus entrance and gathered in-person responses. However, this approach potentially excluded numerous demographics, such

as students who study remotely, those who do not frequent that particular campus area, and those who need internet access.

The inconsistency and the limitations highlighted above indicate the need to adopt more proactive measures. This ensures that our data collection accurately represents our population. Such a measure would include distributing our survey in different parts of the campus of UC Berkeley, distributing at different times of the day and month, and even holding a controlled indoor study, offering incentives such as research credit after completing the survey. Despite efforts to mitigate these challenges, such as in-person solicitation, certain demographic groups may have been inadvertently excluded from our study, and the lack of consistency between our survey demographics and those reported by CollegeFactual underscores the importance of improving our methods better to capture the diversity of UC Berkeley's student body.

SUBSECTION 1: Results of survey

Socialness

Our questionnaire included six questions regarding social media usage related to one's socialness. Our questions included: 1. How would you describe your mood after using social media for longer than 30 minutes? 2. On average, after how long do you begin to feel socially isolated on social media? 3. How socially isolated do you feel while using social media? 4. How socially connected do you feel while using social media? 5. Online social interactions are essential for maintaining your social relationships. 6. Also, on a scale of "1" being disagree and "5" being agree, students responded: I feel comfortable meeting new people on social media platforms.

Six questions were used to assess UC Berkeley undergraduates' socialness level concerning social media usage. To begin, 84.9 percent of students responded that their mood after using social media for periods longer than 30 minutes was at a "3" or less (1 being not positive and 5 being positive). On the other hand, 11.9 percent were at a "4" and 3.2 percent were at a "5" after using social media for periods longer than 30 minutes, respectively (Figure 1). The results show that there are more students whose moods after using social media for periods longer than 30 minutes are not positive than those whose moods are positive.

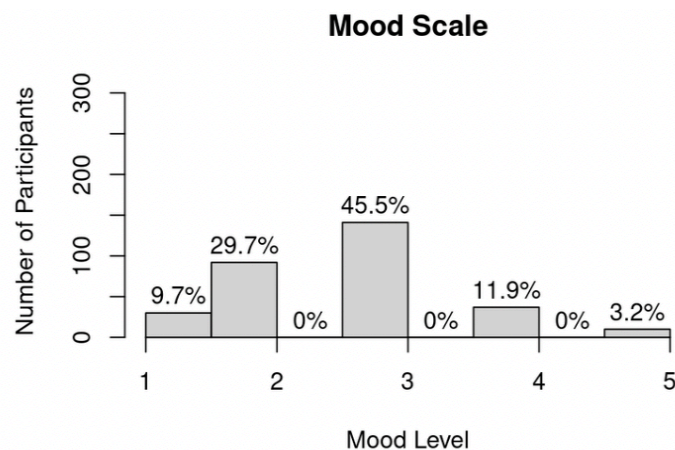


Figure 1: Mood after Social Media

Mood Scale: 1 (Not Positive) to 5 (Positive)

When participants are asked, on average, after how long they begin to feel socially isolated on social media, 55.2 percent selected “1-30 min,” 19.7 percent said “30-60 min” and “I don’t,” 4.5 percent said 60-120 min and 1 percent said “120+ min.” The results show that most students begin to feel isolated on social media on average 1-30 minutes of using it.

Additionally, for the question “How socially isolated do you feel while using social media?” the three most popular responses are “3” (35.5%), “2” (23.9%), and “1” (20.3%). With “1” being not socially isolated and “5” being highly socially isolated, the results showed that the majority of students do not feel socially isolated while using social media, as the majority of students responded with a “3,” which is a neutral stance. Moreover, when asked, “How socially connected do you feel while using social media?” the majority of people responded with “3” (38.1%), “4” (31%), and “2” (20%), as shown in Figure 2. With “1” being not socially connected and “5” being highly socially connected, there is no clear majority over how socially connected one feels while using social media, as the graph is not skewed.

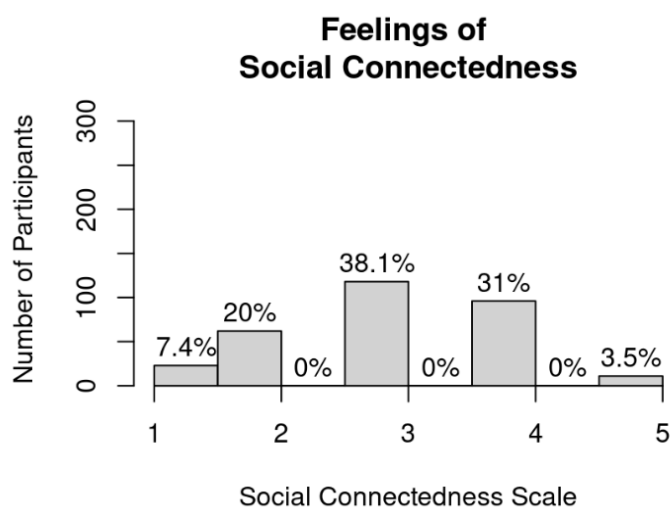


Figure 2: Feelings of Social Connectedness

Social Connectedness Scale: 1 (No Feeling) to 5 (Strong Feeling)

In addition to identifying how social media affects UC Berkeley undergraduates' feelings of isolation and connectedness, we assessed students' online social interactions. According to Figure 3, 60.3 percent of participants in the survey indicated a “4” or “5” when asked, “Online social interactions in maintaining your social relationships are important”. With “1” disagreeing and “5” agreeing, this result shows that many UC Berkeley undergraduate students believe that online social interactions in maintaining social relationships are essential. Also, for the statement, “I feel comfortable meeting new people on social media platforms,” with “1” disagreeing and “5” agreeing, 79.3 percent of students responded with a “3” or less. On the other hand, 14.2 percent were at a “4” and 6.5 percent were at a “5”. Thus, these results show that more students feel uncomfortable being their authentic selves on social media than those who do.

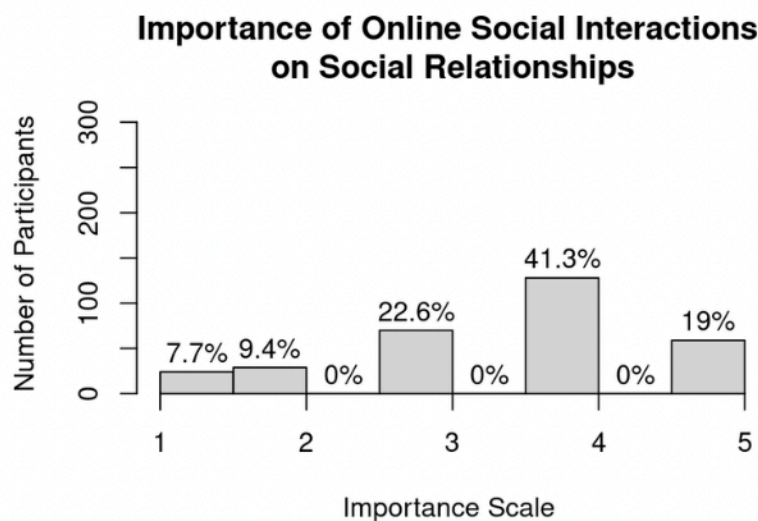


Figure 3: Social Interactions in Maintaining Relationships

Importance Scale: 1 (Not Important) to 5 (Very Important)

Self-Identification

Eight questions were asked regarding self-identification: 1. I am the same person online as in real life. 2. I feel more comfortable being my authentic self on social media. 3. I feel less comfortable being my authentic self on social media. 4. I have what I consider a healthy relationship with social media. 5. Over the past year, I feel that social media has helped me more than hurt me. 6. I feel addicted to social media. 7. I often feel more confident and appreciate myself more after using social media. 8. Most of the time, I feel worse about myself after using social media.

The survey also evaluated UC Berkeley undergraduates' self-identity concerning social media through 8 questions. When asked, "I am the same person online as I am in real life," approximately 70 percent of students responded with a "3" or higher, based on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being "disagree," 5 being "agree," and 3 being a neutral stance). On the other hand, 53 percent of students responded with "2" or less to "I feel more comfortable being my true self on social media." These results correspond with the following question, "I feel less comfortable being my true self on social media," as 70 percent replied with a "3" or greater score. Although most responses indicate that social media accurately represents their identity, an identical majority do not feel comfortable displaying this identity on online platforms. This contradiction invites further analysis of how UC Berkeley undergraduates identify with themselves in social media.

Furthermore, the survey explored how social media benefits self-identity by asking, "I have what I consider a healthy relationship with social media." About 76 percent of responses scored a "3" or higher. Building upon this, responses to "Over the past year, I feel that social media has helped me more than it has hurt me" showcase 68 percent of students selecting a "3"

or higher. While fewer students feel that social media has helped them more than it has helped them, a vast majority assess their association with social media as healthy. However, the subsequent question, “I feel addicted to social media,” resulted in 75 percent replying with a “3” or higher. Approximately the same proportion of students who agree that their relationship with social media is healthy also admit that they are addicted to the platforms, introducing another contradiction within the self-identity data.

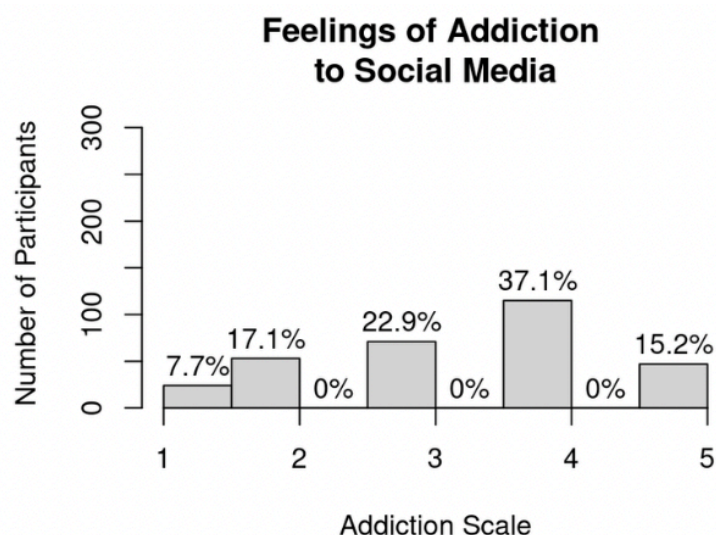


Figure 4: Feelings of Addiction to Social Media

Addiction Scale: 1 (Not Addicted) to 5 (Very Addicted)

Additionally, self-esteem is a crucial facet of self-identity. The survey investigated this by initially asking, “Most of the time, I feel more confident and appreciate myself more after using social media.” Nearly 45 percent responded with a “2” or less. Almost half of the responses hover toward the lower end of the scale. To solidify these findings, the survey asked, “Most of the time, I feel worse about myself after using social media.” About 64 percent replied with a “3” or higher. The data from these two questions corroborate, indicating that social media tends to lower the self-esteem of UC Berkeley undergraduates.

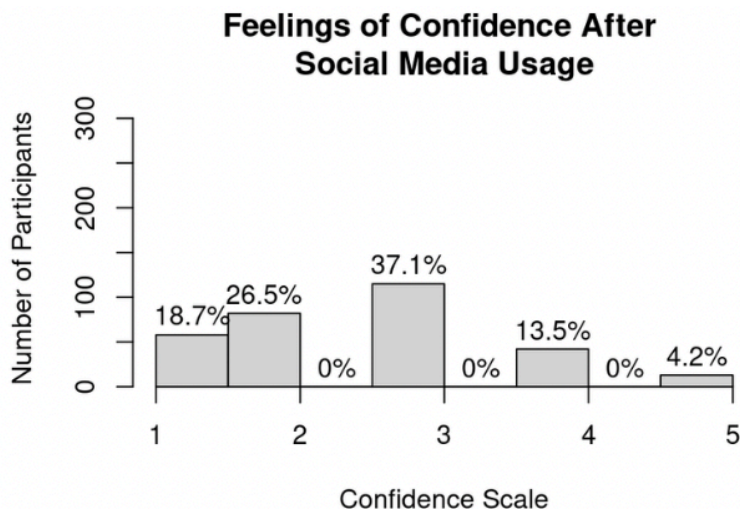


Figure 5: Feelings of Confidence After Social Media Usage

Confidence Scale: 1 (Unconfident) to 5 (Confident)

Connectedness

Seven questions were asked regarding feelings of connectedness: 1. How long do you use any social media platform daily? 2. On average, after how long do you begin to feel socially connected on social media? 3. I feel connected with people when viewing their posts. 4. The amount of likes you get when posting content on social media correlates with your feelings of social connectedness. 5. The number of online friends or followers you have correlated with your feelings of social connectedness. 6. Have you attempted to limit time spent on social media in the past? 7. (If yes to above) Reducing time spent on social media made me feel better.

When we asked participants the question, “How long do you use any platform of social media every day?” the central majority of students, 25.5 percent, responded 60-90 mins; 19 percent responded 30-60 mins; 15.8 percent responded 90-120 mins, and 14.8 percent responded 120-150 mins every day. From these results, we can assume that the amount of time spent on

social media did not drastically differ in that most respondents spend from 30 minutes to 2 hours and 30 min on online platforms daily.

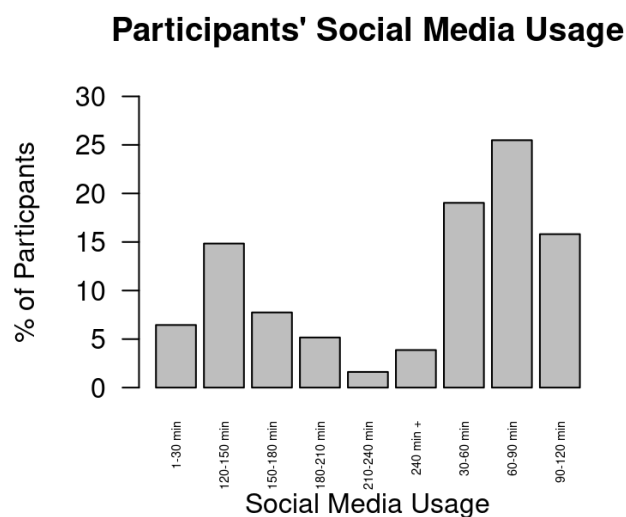


Figure 6: Use of Social Media Amount

Figure 1 shows that more than half of the students (55.2 %) replied that they feel socially connected to social media after 1-30 minutes. This indicates that students at UC Berkeley feel connected to others relatively quickly through online interactions. In contrast, 19.7 percent of students replied that they feel they need to be more socially connected on social media regardless of how much time they spend on social media platforms.

Furthermore, we asked the following question, “I feel connected with people when viewing their posts,” to inquire about the emotional or social connection students experience when viewing posts online. When asked to rate on a scale from 1 (Disagree) to 5 (Agree). 29 percent of students have replied with a “3,” indicating that they may or may not feel a sense of connection or closeness when they see the content others share on social media platforms.

We also inquired if “the amount of likes you get when posting content on social media correlates with your feelings of social connectedness” to inquire whether students feel more likely to feel socially connected through social media interactions if they get higher likes on their

posts. Most students (27.1%) responded with a 1, indicating disagreement. In contrast, 25.8 percent of students responded with a 3 (neutral), 22.6 percent responded with a 2, 19.7 percent with a 4, and 4.8 percent with a 5. Overall, the responses vary widely, suggesting that students have differing perspectives on the role of likes in determining feelings of social connectedness. This diversity in opinions may stem from individual experiences, attitudes toward social media, and personal beliefs about the nature of online interactions.

When asked the question, “The number of online friends or followers you have correlated with your feelings of social connectedness,” the graph appeared to be highly left-skewed in that the majority of students replied with a 1, indicating that having more online followers did not make them feel more connected to others socially. Overall, the results suggest a diverse range of opinions among the respondents. While some strongly believe in the correlation between online friends or followers and social connectedness, others strongly disagree. The majority appear to have more moderate views, with some leaning towards agreement or disagreement and others maintaining a neutral stance.

When asked, “Have you attempted to limit time spent on social media in the past?” 78.1 percent of respondents responded with “Yes,” while 21.9 percent responded “No.” Nearly 8 out of 10 respondents indicated they have attempted to limit their time spent on social media. This suggests that many surveyed individuals have recognized the potential drawbacks or concerns of excessive social media usage and have taken proactive steps to manage their time on these platforms. Approximately 1 out of 5 respondents reported that they have not attempted to limit their time spent on social media in the past. This indicates that there is a minority of individuals who either do not perceive the need to limit their social media usage or have not taken deliberate actions to control their time spent on these platforms.

To those who responded, “Yes,” we asked a follow-up question: “Reducing time spent on social media made me feel better.” Most of our respondents (36.3 %) chose 4, indicating agreement that students experienced positive effects from reducing their time on social media. Although perhaps not as pronounced as those who selected a 5. Nevertheless, they still felt that reducing their social media usage contributed to an improvement in their well-being. Overall, most respondents who attempted to limit their time spent on social media reported experiencing some degree of improvement in their well-being, with varying levels of agreement on the extent of this improvement. However, some did not perceive significant benefits from reducing their social media usage.

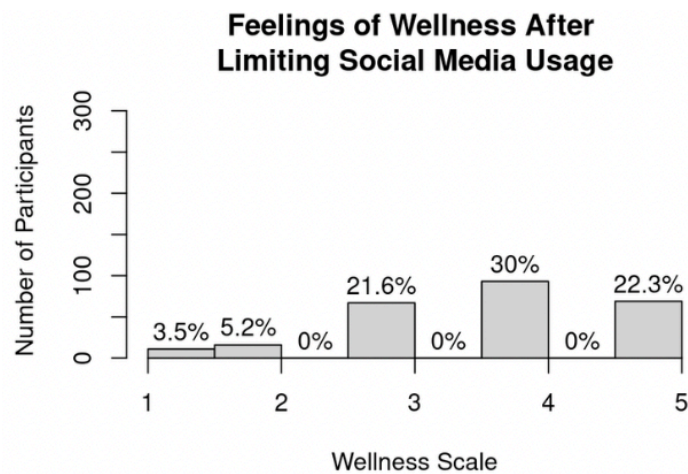


Figure 7: Feelings of Wellness After Limiting Social Media Usage

Wellness Scale: 1 (Limiting Social Media Did Not Make Me Feel Better) to 5 (Limiting Social Media Made Me Feel Better)

SUBSECTION 2 - Case Reviews

In their article, “Digital Belongings: The Intersections of Social Cohesion, connectivity, and Digital Media,” Jay M. Marlowe et al. (2017) report on the role of social media in daily social interactions among young university students. By examining a study of five groups of students from Auckland, New Zealand, the authors explore the experience and implications of the social/digital nexus through the recent theorizations of “belonging.” The authors begin by explaining the concept of social cohesion and how it can facilitate and strengthen diverse social connections. They discuss the participants’ responses in their interviews and surveys and how most of their relationships relied on access and the ability to negotiate social media. Marlowe et al. conclude their article by noting that young students’ use of social media highlights a new means of envisaging belonging and relationships with friends and family.

Surprisingly, our results show that most students feel more socially connected after using social media. Like the participants in Marlowe et al.’s survey, most of our survey participants generally believe that online social interactions help them maintain their social relationships. As Marlowe et al. observes, most students believe that social media provides an avenue for connecting with others as they get an opportunity to know more about the people they meet through their profiles. Students can develop relationships quickly with the help of social connectivity through social media.

From our data, most participants (55.2%) felt that the number of friends and followers does not directly correlate to their feelings of connectedness on social media. However, they believe that connecting through social media makes it easier to bond with each other when they meet in person.

Chia-Chen Yang's article "Instagram Use, Loneliness, and Social Comparison Orientation: Interact and Browse on Social Media, But Do not Compare" investigated the association between social networking sites (SNSs) and loneliness. The study examined interactions among 208 undergraduate students attending a mid-south university in the United States. Participants completed questionnaires assessing demographics, Instagram use, and loneliness. Instagram usage was measured on a Likert scale, with one indicating "Never" and five as "A lot." The higher the score, the higher the frequency of usage. Loneliness was evaluated similarly, using a 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale, with scores from 1 to 4 indicating greater feelings of loneliness.

Contrary to previous research, the study observed a relationship between Instagram usage and lower loneliness, suggesting that online interactions make users feel more connected and less lonely. Yang suggested potential explanations for this relationship, such as college students relying on SNS to engage and learn about peers actively. Yang calls for future research to differentiate between the specifics of SNS content consumption.

The data in surveys administered to 310 students at the University of California, Berkeley, is promising and aligns with Yang's findings. 171 students (55.2 %) reported feelings of social connectedness after 1-30 mins of social media usage. Limitations on confidence must be considered; students' perception of social connectedness fluctuates depending on usage. 118 (38.1%) students reported being indifferent to the overall usage of social media and feeling of social connectedness. Future research must be done to determine the extent to which the duration of social media usage affects social connectedness. The author notes that social comparison orientation (SCO), defined as "the inclination to compare one's accomplishments, one's

situation, and one's experiences with those of others, may moderate and limit the potential benefit of SNS interaction by rendering social connectedness not as satisfactory.

DISCUSSION

One surprising finding from the research is the diversity of opinions regarding the correlation between social media usage and feelings of social connectedness. While it might be expected that increased time on social media would lead to a greater sense of connection, the responses indicate a wide range of perspectives on this matter. Additionally, the high percentage of students who attempted to limit their social media usage was unexpected, suggesting a significant awareness of the potential negative impacts of excessive screen time.

The neutral responses, particularly regarding the correlation between likes on social media posts and feelings of social connectedness, could stem from the complexity of online interactions. Social media experiences can vary greatly depending on individual preferences, the nature of relationships with online connections, and the type of content being consumed. Some respondents may have had mixed feelings or experiences, leading them to select a neutral response.

The case study section provides several pieces of evidence to support the analysis. For instance, the high percentage (78.1%) of respondents who reported attempting to limit their social media usage indicates a significant awareness of the potential drawbacks of excessive screen time. Furthermore, the varying responses to questions about social connectedness and online interactions demonstrate the complexity of individuals' experiences with social media.

While the study was conducted at UC Berkeley, the findings can likely be generalized to similar populations, as many individuals experience similar social media usage patterns and are

concerned about its effects on well-being. However, it is essential to acknowledge that cultural, demographic, and institutional differences may influence these patterns. Hence, replicating the study at different universities or in diverse cultural contexts could provide further insights into the generalizability of the findings.

Further, students' responses may be influenced by various factors, including personal experiences, attitudes towards social media, and broader societal norms. For example, those who reported feeling socially connected after a short time on social media may prioritize online interactions and perceive them as meaningful. Conversely, individuals who expressed a desire to limit their social media usage may have experienced adverse effects such as addiction, distraction, or decreased well-being, prompting them to seek ways to reduce their screen time. Additionally, the varying perspectives on the role of likes and online followers in social connectedness may reflect differing beliefs about the authenticity and value of online interactions.

The results show a mix of high social media usage and attempts to limit it, indicating awareness of its potential drawbacks. Feelings of social connectedness varied widely, suggesting subjective experiences. Perspectives on likes/followers' connection roles varied, reflecting differing beliefs about online interactions. Attempts to limit social media usage were common, with many reporting positive effects, but not all experienced significant benefits, indicating a complex relationship between screen time and well-being. Overall, the findings emphasize the nuanced nature of individuals' experiences with social media and the importance of understanding its impact on social connections and well-being.

CONCLUSION

While some scholarly articles associate social media utilization with loneliness and others with feelings of social connectedness, our survey, which collected 310 responses, could not draw a concrete association between social media use and feelings of social isolation or connectedness. We believe this conclusion was reached due to many factors, including people's beliefs about social media, their introversion/extroversion, preferences for using social media, and preference for online or in-person interactions. As our data above shows, many of our questions reached a neutral conclusion. However, we found that people had lower mood levels and decreased confidence after social media use. It was interesting to note that social media was crucial in maintaining relationships with others, given the decreased mood and confidence levels. Future studies might include surveying people in a controlled environment and asking them questions about their personality (i.e., introversion/extraversion levels) and their preference for in-person or online social interactions.

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FIGURES

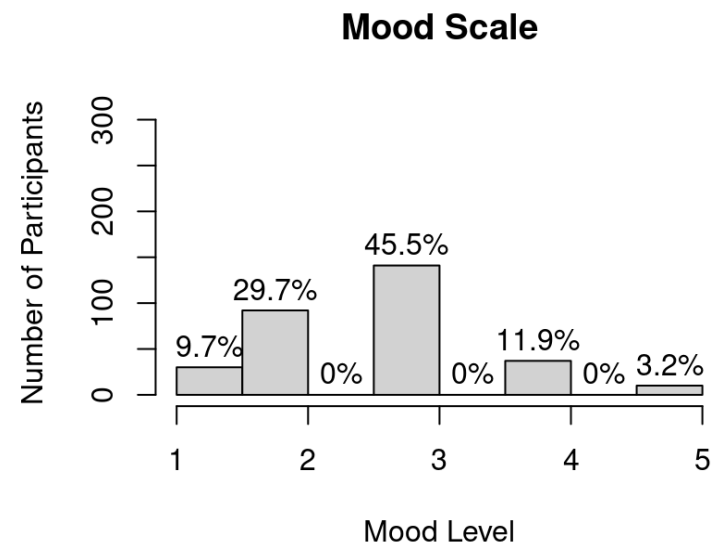


Figure 1: Mood Levels of Participants

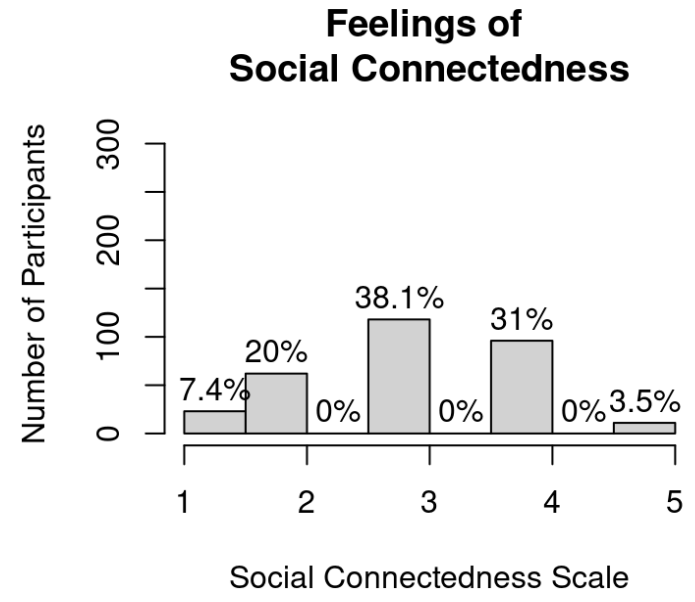


Figure 2: Feelings of Social Connectedness of Participants

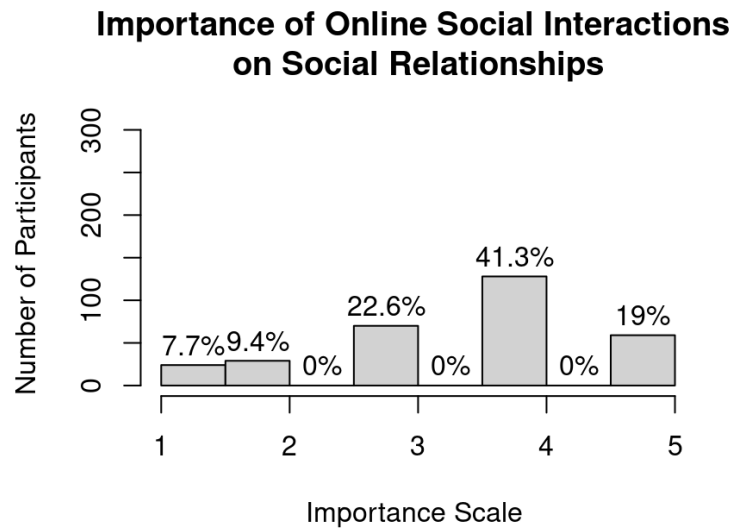


Figure 3: Importance of Online Social Interactions on Social Relationships to Participants

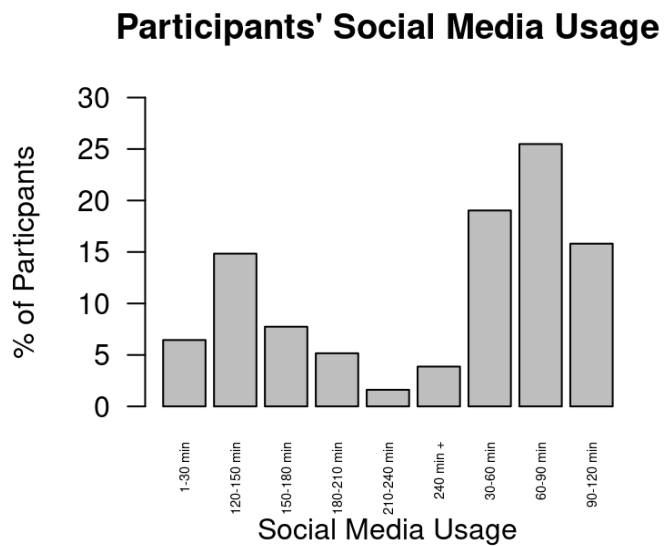


Figure 4: Participants' Social Media Usage in Minutes