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SELFIES, STORIES, & STATUSES: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE  
ON THE SELF-ESTEEM OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business  
Department of Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

---

by

Nick Dennig

May 2021

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Nick Dennig

entitled

Selfies, Stories, and Statuses: The Impact of Social Media Usage  
on the Self-Esteem of College Students

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2021

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### Abstract

Social media is pervasive in today's culture, and this reality is true among college students as well. As a result, students must understand what, if any, impact social media usage had on their lives, specifically self-esteem. This quantitative, true experiment answered the question "What impact does social media usage have on the self-esteem of college students?" For the purpose of this study, social media usage was defined as time spent on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube. This study took place at a private, small, four-year, liberal arts institution in the Midwest and included 61 participants. Participants were asked to voluntarily participate in a four-week study in which they were randomly assigned to one of two groups, abstaining from social media usage for the four weeks or continuing social media usage for the four weeks. These participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale as a pre-test and post-test to the experiment. The group of students who abstained from social media usage were given five open-ended questions to answer in the post-test of the study. The results indicated the self-esteem of college students is not impacted by social media usage. Students and higher education professionals should consider the ways social media usage influence their lives.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge that I would not be where I am today without the love and grace of Jesus Christ. He gave me the strength, endurance, and desire to pursue this endeavor, and He opened all the necessary doors for this journey in MAHE to be possible.

I would like to thank my family for their support throughout my entire two years in MAHE. You have always been my biggest fans and have always been there for me. You are the best, and I am so thankful to have you in my life. God has been so good to me, and you are the greatest gift I have in this world. I love you guys so much.

My committee has been great throughout this process. I am so grateful to have Kelly, Skip, and Todd to work alongside with in my thesis. Kelly, you are the best supervisor anyone could ask for. I have learned so much from you in these two years through the laughs, conversations, and light-bulb moments. Thank you for your guidance and wisdom along the way.

The MAHE program has been amazing for me over the last 2 years. I am so thankful for my assistantship, professors, and friends who I have come to know through MAHE. We have made some amazing memories, and I am grateful that each of you are in my life.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

College students use social media at high levels. For example, Pew Research Center conducted a survey on social media use among Americans and found that 18- to 24-year-olds had the highest percentage of social media use compared to other age groups (Smith & Anderson, 2018). One of the key connections from social media usage is the relationship between social media and self-esteem (Hawi & Rupert, 2016). Social media and self-esteem are two important aspects in the lives of college students. Therefore, this study sought to explain if there is a connection between social media and self-esteem and how social media usage may impact the self-esteem of college students.

### **Social Media**

Social media is growing in popularity, especially among college students. Manning (2014) defines social media as “new forms of media that involve interactive participation” (p. 1158). While many forms of social media exist, for the purpose of this study, social media usage was defined as time spent on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube. These networks are the forms of social media included in the survey by Pew Research Center in 2018 (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Because social media usage is prominent among college students, higher education professionals must understand the ways in which it affects college students. The high usage of social media among 18- to 24-year-olds indicate that this construct is significant, and colleges and universities ought to consider its presence in the current technological culture.

## **Self-Esteem**

As a prolific researcher on self-esteem, Rosenberg (1965) defined self-image as “an attitude toward an object” (p. 5). Because the use of “attitude” in this definition could have many meanings, Rosenberg expounds on the definition: “The term ‘attitude’ is used broadly to include facts, opinions, and values with regard to the self, as well as a favorable or unfavorable orientation to the self” (p. 5). These definitions are conceptual ways in which the literature defined self-esteem, including “self-image” and “self-concept.”

The concept of self-esteem is important to study because self-esteem affects various aspects of students’ lives. Sexual objectification, psychological resilience, depressive symptoms, communication, social media addiction, and other constructs impact a student’s self-esteem (Bilgin & Taş, 2018; Davis, 2018; Kuss et al. 2014). For example, Andreassen et al. (2016) emphasize a potential correlation between social media and self-esteem: “If an individual thinks ‘I am not likable’ or ‘I have poor social skills’—while at the same time believing that having a large number of friends or followers will change such self-conceptions—this may trigger addictive social media participation” (p. 2). After conducting their research on the relationship between addictive social media usage, narcissism, and self-esteem, they found “self-esteem was negatively related to addictive use of social media” (p. 5). As one’s social media use increased, self-esteem decreased.

## **Social Media & Self-Esteem**

More screen time contributes to a rise in mental health issues in members of iGen (Twenge 2017). Twenge (2017) defined iGen as “born in 1995 and later, they grew up

with cell phones, had an Instagram page before they started high school, and do not remember a time before the internet” (p. 2). According to Twenge, “iGen’ers look so happy online, making goofy faces on Snapchat and smiling in their pictures on Instagram” (p. 94), but they are in the midst of an intense mental health battle. She explained that depressive symptoms are on an upward trajectory in iGen, and social media might be one of the reasons this trend occurs. Her data indicated that social media affected the way members of this generation perceive themselves compared to their friends and peers they see online. Ultimately, social media is pervading iGen and its presence is undeniable. Twenge’s research focused more on teenagers in high school, but these teens are part of the generation currently enrolled in college. Her research shows a strong connection between social media and self-esteem.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of studying social media usage among college students is paramount because of the high percentage of college students who use social media. Self-esteem impacts college students in various aspects of their lives, demonstrating why self-esteem is necessary to study as well. Thus, the purpose of this study was to highlight the impact social media usage has on the self-esteem of college students. The following research question guided the study: What is the impact of social media usage on the self-esteem of college students? Additional questions considered in this study include: Does social media have a negative impact of self-esteem? Does social media have a positive impact on self-esteem? And, are breaks from social media beneficial or detrimental to college students? Chapter 2 provides an in-depth exploration of social media and self-esteem literature relevant to the lives of college students.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The connection between social media and self-esteem is important for higher education professionals to understand. The purpose of this study was to see what impact social media had on the self-esteem of college students. Chapter 1 provided a framework for social media, self-esteem, and its relevance in the lives of college students. This chapter presents a more in-depth summary of the relevant research and literature related to social media, self-esteem, and its impact on college students. The review of this literature defines social media and provides social media usage statistics among college-aged students. It also examines the literature's definition of self-esteem and a scale that measures self-esteem. Lastly, this chapter reviews research on how social media impacts a person's self-esteem.

#### **Social Media**

Students are attending college at a time when social media is prominent and at their fingertips. The increased use of smart phones and social media apps impacts how college students live their daily lives (Barnett & Cothorn, 2011). Social media is an ambiguous term Manning (2014) defined as “new forms of media that involve interactive participation” (p. 1158). Other common language related to social media in the literature is “social networking sites” which are described as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom

they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

Specific social media platforms are incredibly popular among college students.

The Pew Research Center surveyed 18- to 24-year-olds on social media usage. The results indicate the rampant usage of social media among college-aged students, finding that 80% of 18- to 24-year-olds use Facebook, 78% use Snapchat, 71% use Instagram, and 45% use Twitter (Smith & Anderson, 2018). These findings are significantly higher than other age groups surveyed by Pew. According to Global Web Index, Gen Z, globally, spends an average of two hours and 41 minutes a day using social media (Chaffey, 2020). A comparison of time spent on social media with other generations is included in Table 1. A high percentage of college students dedicate a significant portion of their day to social media usage.

**Table 1**

*Daily Time Spent on Social Media (January-March 2020)*

Age Group	Average daily time spent using social networks (hh:mm)
Gen Z	02:41
Millennials	02:22
Gen X	01:49
Baby Boomers	01:11

Because of high usage of social media, internet addiction is prevalent in the lives of some college students, a reality impacting their everyday lives. Niemz et al. (2005) discuss internet addiction and mention pathological internet use (PIU). This term refers to an increased participation in internet activities and struggles with withdrawal for college students (Niemz et al., 2005). Their results concluded “that 30.5% of the 371 students

who responded reported no symptoms of PIU, while just over half (51%) reported one to three symptoms, suggesting that they may be experiencing some problems as a result of excessive Internet use” (p. 566).

Kuss et al. (2014) similarly highlight the relevance of internet addiction that increasingly is becoming dependent on technology. They state, “the increasing popularity and frequency of Internet use has led to the emergence of clinical cases presenting abuse symptoms” (p. 1). Furthermore, they explain the symptoms were determined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders and included “tolerance, withdrawal, lack of control, relapse, large amounts of time spent online, negative consequences, and continuation of use irrespective of problem awareness” (p. 1). These symptoms demonstrate internet addiction can dramatically impact many aspects of the lives of college students.

### **Self-Esteem**

According to Blascovich and Tomaka (1991), self-esteem is defined as “the overall affective evaluation of one’s own worth, value, or importance” (p. 115). Smith et al. (2014) define self-esteem as “an individual’s positive or negative evaluation of himself or herself” (p. 107). People’s self-esteem can be rooted in many different aspects of their lives. Crocker and Luhtanen (2003) explain, “for some people, self-esteem may depend on being attractive, loved, or good at school; for others, self-esteem may depend on being virtuous, powerful, or self-reliant” (p. 701). College students find themselves in a similar position. These students are learning how to prioritize academics, social relationships, familial relationships, obtaining an internship or job, staying physically,

mentally, and emotionally healthy. Self-esteem depends on each of these things and can look different for each student.

Rosenberg (1965) designed an instrument known as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, which is used extensively in the literature exploring self-esteem. In his book, he lays out the criteria for creating this scale, which include the following: ease of administration, economy of time, unidimensionality, and face of validity (pp. 16–17). This scale has ten statements that a person responds to, and “respondents were asked to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree” with those statements (p. 17).

### **Social Media and Self Esteem**

The connection between social media and self-esteem is evident throughout the literature. Hawi and Rupert (2016) studied the relationship between self-esteem and social media among college students: “Our results suggest that, independently from culture and gender, there exists a negative relationship between social media addiction and self-esteem” (p. 8).

Hawi and Rupert’s (2016) findings were consistent with what other researchers discovered. Niemz et al. (2005) tested multiple hypotheses in their research and found “the hypothesis that pathological users would score lower on the self-esteem scale was supported,” but they were unable to determine pathological internet use led to lower self-esteem or if it was the other way around (p. 567). This finding is consistent with what Hawi and Rupert (2016) discovered in their research. Faraon and Kaipainen (2014) studied the relationship between Facebook and self-esteem and found

both time spent on Facebook and the number of Facebook friends correlated negatively with self-esteem, suggesting that extensive use of the social

networking site and having many friends are related to lower self-esteem, although it is not determined in what manner. (p. 90)

Both of these studies came to the same conclusion: that excessive internet use and more Facebook usage correlated to lower self-esteem. All the authors acknowledged uncertainty as it relates to causation. There was no clear conclusion determining if excessive use of internet platforms leads to lower self-esteem or if lower self-esteem leads to an increased use of internet platforms.

Researchers also studied the way social media impacts the way a person see others, not just the way they view themselves. Chou and Edge (2012) hypothesized, “those who are more involved with using Facebook are more likely to perceive that others are happier and are having better lives, and are less likely to agree that life is fair (availability heuristic)” (p. 118). They conducted an experiment in which the results supported this hypothesis. According to that study, Facebook usage led to seeing others as having a better life, and people see their own lives as unfair in comparison.

### ***Psychological Resilience***

Bilgin and Taş (2018) explored the impact social media addiction has on perceived social support and psychological resilience among university students. They discovered “a low and negative relationship was found between perceived social support from family, perceived social support from a special person and perceived social support from friends, subscales of the perceived social support scale and social media addiction” (p. 755). Ultimately, social media affects different aspects of students’ lives, but there still needs to be a determination on whether this affect is a positive or negative one.

### *Sexual Objectification*

Social media influences the way college students understand and experience sexualization. Sexual objectification (SO) is a prominent aspect of social media with certain pages and accounts that highlight women for the glorification of their bodies. Manago et al. (2015) explained men can also experience sexual objectification, and they cited two studies which show that men post sexualized pictures of themselves and are concerned with their body image. The authors continued, “this trend is happening in concert with the increasing representation of men as sex objects in U.S. commercial media” (p. 6). Thus, both women and men experience sexual objectification through social media. Szymanski et al. (2011) described the implications of sexual objectification on women:

Internalized SO or self-objectification occurs when women internalize their experiences of SO and begin to view themselves as objects that are worthy based on appearance; it often manifests in the act of consistently measuring oneself against cultural standards of beauty. (p. 108)

Davis (2018) provided an analysis of how two social media sites on Instagram represent the objectification, sexualization, and misrepresentation of women specifically. The sites Davis used in her research highlight three themes: “objectification of female college students, submissiveness of female college students, and emphasis on a young white college experience” (p. 1). Davis provided evidence of the popular use of Instagram among college students providing further rationale for the value of this study.

Davis (2018) explained the sexualization experienced on the two sites from her study and states, “women are displayed frequently as sexual objects on both Four Year

Party and College Nationwide” (p. 4). She provided specific and graphic examples of the objectification and sexualization that females experience on these sites. Captions attached to photos and videos demeaned, objectified, and belittled women. Many times, women on these sites are viewed as toys or objects to be had by men. Davis showed the purpose of these sites were not to empower and admire the women that appeared. In contrast, she explained how some of the videos and posts on these sites are of women who were unconscious and unaware of what was happening to them. Social media can glorify sexualization through posts and videos like the ones Davis explores in this article.

Sexual objectification can negatively impact a person’s self-esteem. Mercurio and Landry (2008) explain, “experiences of objectification in society lead women to adopt and internalize a third person perspective on their physical self in which they see themselves as an object” (p. 458). Viewing oneself as an object can lead to lower self-esteem. Mercurio and Landry explore this further: “In American culture, where this standard is likely to be an ideal female form that is hard to emulate, comparisons may lead to feelings of inadequacy and shame for many women” (p. 459). Social media is an integral part of American culture that negatively impacts a person’s self-esteem through sexual objectification experienced on social media.

### ***Communication and Self-Concept***

Social media creates an opportunity for users to communicate with friends and family who may live far away from one another. It also impacts the way self-concept develops in college students. Sponcil and Gitimu (2013) explored the relationship college students experience between the use of social media and their communication and self-concept. They outlined the main reasons students are on social networking sites. The

reasons included communicating with friends and family, boredom, and entertainment (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013).

Sponcil and Gitimu (2013) discovered that social media helps students communicate with friends they have now, and students surveyed rated communication via social networking sites as good. Regarding self-concept, students found that social media helped develop a positive self-concept, or it had no impact on self-concept. Other studies have results that conflict with the findings from Sponcil and Gitimu. As stated previously, evidence from other studies demonstrate that social media usage and self-esteem have a negative relationship. Clearly, the increasing usage of social media among college students influences their communication and self-concept.

Gonzales and Hancock (2011) explored the relationship between Facebook and self-esteem. The purpose of their study was “to test the effects of exposure to Facebook on self-esteem relative to traditional self-awareness enhancing stimuli, such as a mirror or photo of oneself” (p. 81). They found that Facebook has a positive relationship with self-esteem. In the experiment, they had three groups of people: a group who looked at Facebook; a group who looked at a mirror; and a group that did neither. Individuals from all three groups filled out the survey and the results showed the group exposed to Facebook had positive self-esteem. In the discussion of their work, Gonzales and Hancock explained, “by allowing people to present preferred or positive information about the self, Facebook is a unique source of self-awareness stimuli in that it enhances awareness of the optimal self” (p. 82). Their research agreed with the findings of Sponcil and Gitimu (2013). Yet, this finding is inconsistent with much of the research presented

above which outlines the negative relationship between social media usage and self-esteem.

### **Conclusion**

After a thorough review of the literature, social media and self-esteem were strongly connected. This chapter reviewed the literature and defined social media and self-esteem. It also provided a self-esteem scale that is widely used and respected among the literature regarding self-esteem. The review of the literature also showed conflicting results in how social media and self-esteem impact one another. Numerous authors found that a negative relationship exists between social media and self-esteem. Others concluded the opposite is true—social media and self-esteem possess a positive relationship.

Students and higher education professionals must recognize the interconnectedness between social media and self-esteem. The existing research showed that both positive and negative attributes occur because of the link between self-esteem and social media. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand the impact social media has on the self-esteem of college students. The next chapter explains the methodology used to explore how social media shapes the self-esteem of college students.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This study was designed to investigate how social media impacts self-esteem by comparing one group of students that stayed on social media and one group of students who discontinued using social media for an established period of time. This chapter explains the methodological design, provides context for the study, describes the participants, delineates the procedures of data collection, and explains the data analysis.

#### **Design of the Study**

The impact social media has on the self-esteem of college students was studied by using a true experiment methodology. Rosenberg (1965) created the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, which is effective for quantitative studies. Furthermore, Rosenberg's scale was widely used in numerous studies which explored the relationship between social media and self-esteem. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) explained the design of a true experiment, and based on the descriptions they provided, this methodology is the optimal design. This study used a true experiment design because a quantitative methodology is most often used by researchers when studying social media and self-esteem. Secondly, a true experiment allowed for a comparison between a control group and an experimental group.

This study investigated two groups of students that either continued their use of social media or abstained their use for a set period of time. It used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989) to measure self-esteem. Both elements are quantitative

in nature, so this was reflected in the design. This study conducted a true experiment, and Creswell and Guetterman (2019) explains that a true experiment includes random assignment, two groups of people to be compared, one intervention, measurement of the dependent variable, a pre-test, and a post-test (p. 310).

### **Context and Participants**

This study occurred at a private, small, four-year, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. This study had 61 participants which included 43 female participants and 18 male participants. Of the 61 participants, 15 were freshmen, 11 were sophomores, 19 were juniors, and 16 were seniors. All students were required to give consent in order to participate in the study. The students' participation in the study was voluntary, and they were allowed to discontinue participation at any point in the experiment. The goal of this study was to discover how social media impacts the self-esteem of college students.

### **Procedures**

The first step was to have the students provide consent to participate in the study. These students were randomly assigned into two different groups. Thirty participants were in the control group, and they continued using social media. The remaining 31 participants were in the experimental group, and they abstained from using social media. This experiment lasted for a total of four weeks. After random assignment, participants in both groups were given the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale as a pre-test. The four-week period began after all the pre-tests are completed. The control group of participants continued their use of social media for the four-week time period, and the experimental group abstained from social media usage for the same time period. At the end of the four-week period, participants from each group completed a post-test (see Appendix). The

participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale for a second time. The post-test also included open-ended questions for the students who abstained from social media usage to understand more about their experience over the four-week time period.

### **Instrumentation**

Based on an extensive review of the literature, Rosenberg (1965) was identified as an expert in the field of self-esteem, and many studies have used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to examine self-esteem. Moreover, Robins et al. (2001) explain the prominence of Rosenberg's scale: "Of these [types of scales], the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) is by far the most widely used" (p. 151). They further expand on the depth of this scale and state, "the RSE also has received more psychometric analysis and empirical validation than any other self-esteem measure" (p. 151). This evidence showed the usefulness and value—in addition to the validity and reliability—that the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has contributed to the self-esteem research community.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the data were collected, a means comparison analysis was utilized. The means comparison analysis was chosen because it best explains the results of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale pre-test and post-test that were completed by the participants in the experiment. The statistical test used to compare the means was an independent samples *t*-test, as "there are two experimental conditions and different participants were assigned to each condition" (Fields, 2013, p. 364). Responses to the open-ended questions were transcribed, coded, and themed since they were qualitative in nature.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter briefly summarizes the methodology used to conduct this study. A quantitative, true experiment was the best design to answer the research question: What impact does social media usage have on the self-esteem of college students? The design, context, participants, procedures, instrumentation, and data analysis were outlined in this chapter. The next chapter will share the results from the study.

## Chapter 4

### Results

This quantitative, true experiment study was designed to understand the relationship between social media usage and the self-esteem of college students. Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale as a pre-test and post-test for the experiment. An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare self-esteem for college students who continued or discontinued their use of social media.

#### Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 shows pre-test averages and post-test averages, and Table 3 shows the differences between those averages, for the group of students who continued using social media and the group of students who abstained from using social media. There were 61 total participants in this study. The group of students who continued using social media had 30 participants. The group of students who abstained from using social media had 31 participants. For the 31 participants who abstained from using social media, there were five open-ended questions to which they responded to as part of their post-test survey.

The positive difference in means for both the continuing group and the abstaining group indicated that both groups experienced a positive change in self-esteem over the four-week experiment. A higher average on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale demonstrated a higher self-esteem. The *p*-value of .719 meant that there was no statistical significance in the difference between pre-test and post-test average score means of the continuing group and of the abstaining group.

**Table 2***Pre-Test and Post-Test Average Scores*

Group	N	Pre-Test Average Scores		Post-Test Average Scores	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Abstaining	31	3.12	0.50	3.21	0.60
Continuing	30	2.78	0.50	2.93	0.53

*Note:* *N* indicates the number of participants. *M* indicates the mean of all the scores for each group. *SD* indicates standard deviation.

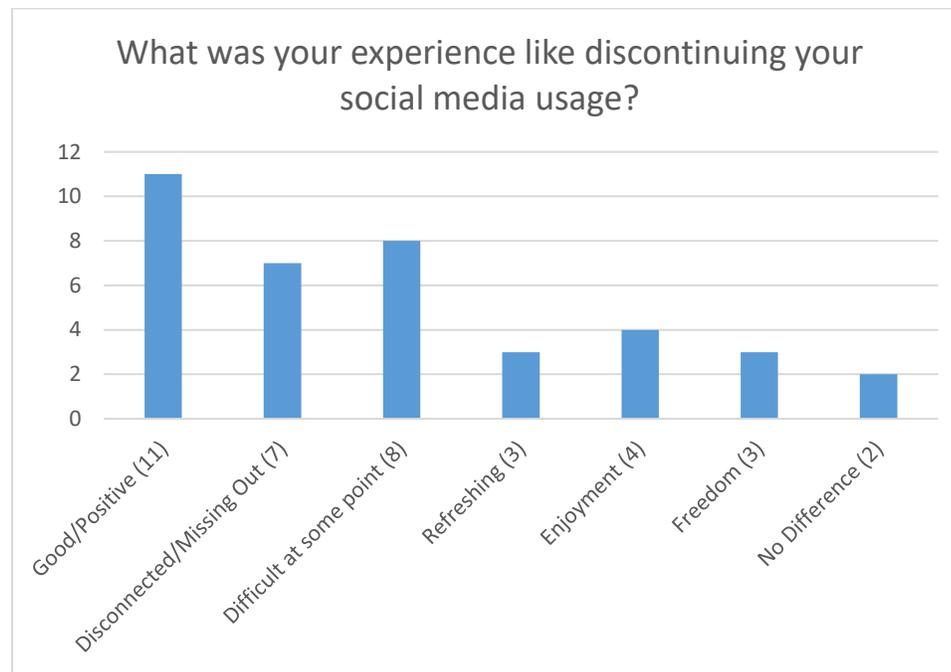
**Table 3***Difference Between Pre-Test and Post-Test Average Scores*

Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Abstaining	31	.09	.42
Continuing	30	.15	.41

*Note:* *N* indicates the number of participants. *M* indicates the mean of all the scores for each group. *SD* indicates standard deviation.

**Themes From Qualitative Questions**

Several different themes emerged in the short-answer responses from the group of participants who abstained from using social media. Participants mentioned that they found it freeing, refreshing, and enjoyable. They had better time management, productivity, and focus. However, they also experienced being disconnected from others and feeling like they were missing out on what was happening. They mentioned this study was difficult to participate in, especially at the beginning due to the disconnection from others. (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1***Post-Test Survey Question #1*

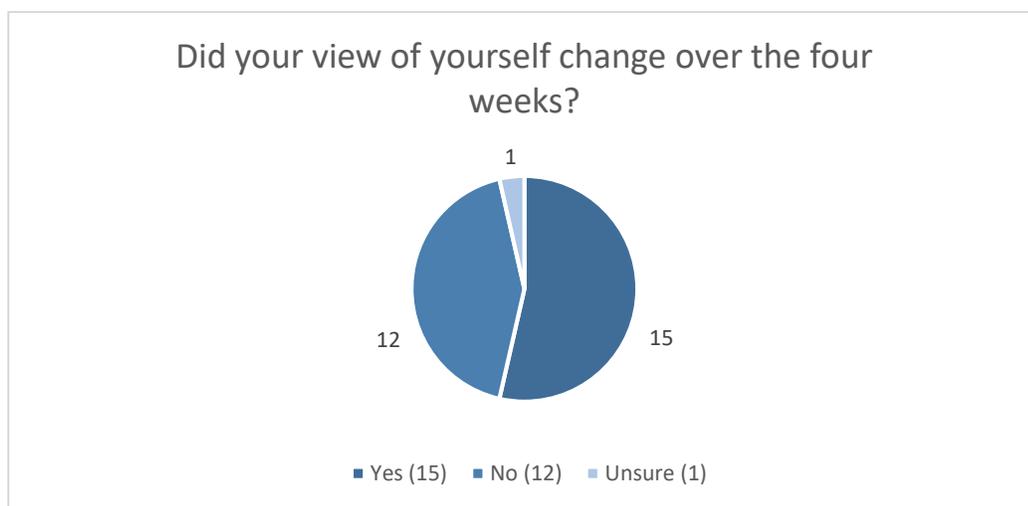
When asked whether discontinuing use of social media had an impact on their self-esteem, 15 participants reported a positive shift in self-esteem of some kind. Additionally, 14 participants reported the experiment had little to no impact on their self-esteem. One of the major themes that stood out from the responses is comparison. Of the 31 responses, 19 participants directly mentioned comparison or articulated comparison-like characteristics in their responses. Generally, participants reported that they were comparing themselves less to others when they abstained from social media. However, a couple participants reported that they experienced comparison in different areas than social media.

Some students who abstained from social media experienced a shift in their view of themselves, while others did not. One student was unsure how abstaining from social media impacted their view of oneself (Figure 2). When asked about encouraging others to

take breaks from social media and if they would consider taking a break from social media again in the future, 29 out of the 31 participants said they would recommend others taking a break from social media, and 28 out of the 31 participants would consider taking a break from social media again in the future or have implemented a change since participating in this study (Figures 3 and 4).

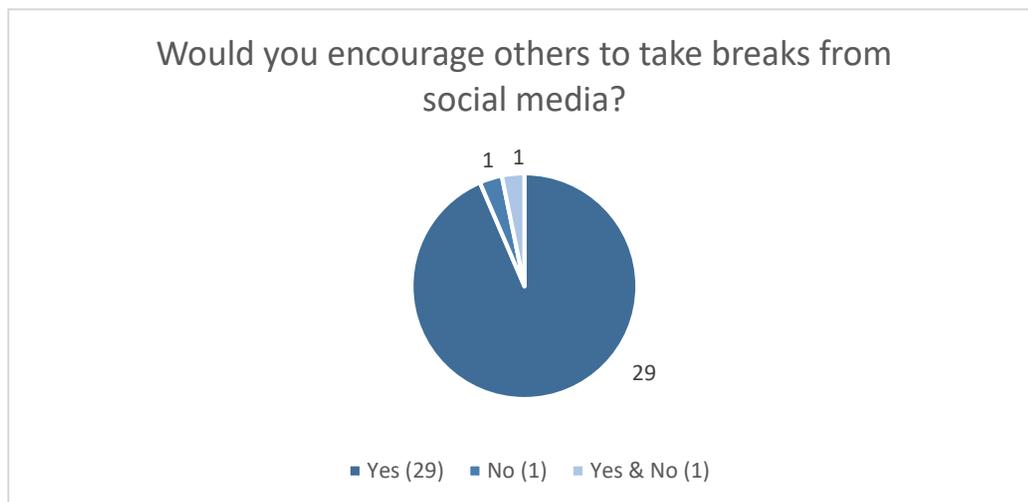
## Figure 2

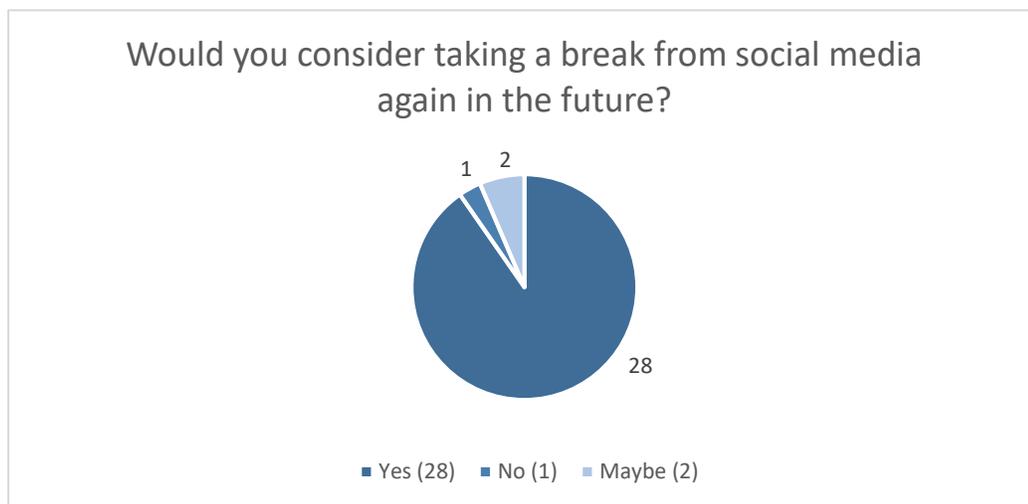
### *Post-Test Survey Question #3*



## Figure 3

### *Post-Test Survey Question #4*



**Figure 4***Post-Test Survey Question #5***Conclusion**

Based on the findings, the group of students who continued using social media and the group of students who abstained from using social media both experienced a slight positive shift in their average self-esteem score. The group of students who continued using social media experienced a somewhat greater difference between pre-test and post-test scores, but the group of students who abstained from using social media had a higher pre-test average and a higher post-test average regarding self-esteem score. The students who abstained from social media usage mentioned the difficulty of their random assignment and disconnected nature of this study. They also discussed better productivity, time management, and focus along with experiencing less comparison to others. Many of the participants would consider abstaining from social media again and encourage others to do so.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

This quantitative study sought to answer the question: What impact does social media usage have on the self-esteem of college students? This question was worthy of research because of the high social media usage rate among college age students (Chaffey, 2020; Smith & Anderson, 2018). The literature provided different answers to the questions, but many studies suggested that there is a negative relationship between social media usage and self-esteem (Faraon & Kaipainen, 2014; Hawi & Rupert, 2016; Niemz et al., 2005). A negative relationship indicated that as social media usage increased, self-esteem decreased. Other authors reported that a positive relationship exists between social media usage and self-esteem—meaning that as social media usage increased, self-esteem also increased (Gonzales & Hancock 2011; Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013). The results from this study indicated that social media usage does not impact the self-esteem of college students.

Both groups of students (social media abstainers and continuers) on average experienced a positive shift in their self-esteem over the four weeks of the experiment. From the pre-test to post-test scores, the abstaining group had an average 0.09 higher score on a four-point scale which indicated a positive change in self-esteem. Similarly, from the pre-test to post-test scores, the continuing group had an average 0.15 higher score. This score demonstrated a positive change in self-esteem as well. The difference between 0.09 and 0.15 for the two groups was not statistically significant ( $p = .719$ ).

Therefore, the positive change in self-esteem scores for both groups was similar. This conclusion leads to an analysis of what can be gained from this study.

This study should encourage students to reflect on the ways social media affects their lives, including self-esteem. In their post-test responses, 28 of the 31 participants who abstained from using social media said they would encourage others to take a break. These students mentioned they experienced better productivity, less anxiety, and less comparison during their time away from social media. With these results, students should consider regular breaks from social media in order to contribute to a healthier sense of self.

Students must also consider the ramifications that comparison has on their lives. With 19 out of 31 participants directly or indirectly describing comparison, it remains evident that comparison persists in the lives of college students. Social media can increase the comparison students experience with comparison being available at their fingertips. They struggle with comparison outside of social media as well, so they must engage deeply with the impact of comparison on their lives. Students should consider ways to lessen comparison in their lives or find ways that comparison can be healthy.

By participating in this study, students became more aware of how much time they spent on social media and what impact time on social media had on their lives. Screen time contributes to the rise of mental health concerns among the next generation of college students (Twenge, 2017). Amid a mental health crisis among college students, students in this study reported that they were less anxious when they spent time off social media. Students articulated how abstaining from social media impacted their lives

including and beyond self-esteem. Student development and academic professionals can both learn helpful implications from this study.

### **Implications for Practice**

Professionals have the opportunity to gain insight about the impact social media usage has on college students through this study. One of the major implications of this research is the importance of general awareness of social media. This study shows that social media usage affects some students' self-esteem, but it also impacts other areas of their lives as well. Anxiety, productivity, disconnection, and focus were aspects of students' lives influenced by abstaining from social media.

Programmatically, professionals could design programming that increases students' awareness of their own wellness. Social media usage could be a major part of this wellness program based on the evidence of how it impacts self-esteem (Andreassen et al., 2016; Faraon & Kaipainen, 2014; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Hawi & Rupert, 2016; Niemz et al., 2005; Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013). One such wellness program could encourage a campus-wide initiative to fast or take a break from social media for a period of time.

Additionally, professionals themselves could also participate in such programming to see what positive impacts abstaining from social media can have on their own lives. In today's context, social media is used for marketing, advertising, and connecting with others. However, higher education professionals need to understand both the positive and negative implications of social media in their own lives and students' lives.

Finally, with the growth and high use of social media, professionals in higher education must continue research to further explore the development and influence of social media in the lives of students. The rate at which Gen Z interacts with social media indicates that social media will continue to play a major role in their lives (Chaffey, 2020; Smith & Anderson, 2018). Professors should consider integrating social media breaks and fasts into classes if it fits into the curriculum. Another possible idea for professionals would be creating a class that teaches students best practices and implications of social media usage. At the very least, workshops and seminars about social media would benefit both professionals and students.

### **Implications for Future Research**

One of the areas of future research that could be beneficial for the topic of social media usage and its relationship with self-esteem is a longer study. A study designed with a longer period of time off social media could provide different results. It could lead to a more accurate change or continuation of self-esteem. Another aspect of future research could be to see what the difference in self-esteem looks like for students who are already off social media and compare that to students who use it. This type of study would potentially be better as a qualitative study which could also serve to fill a gap in the literature.

Exploring the relationship between social media and other aspects of students' lives could be beneficial to study as well. Social media usage has a relationship with many other parts of students' lives beyond self-esteem. Social media usage could impact spiritual development, academic success, time management, and productivity, among

others. Future research could be done to see what impact social media usage has in relation to other aspects of students' lives.

In this study, simple random sampling was chosen because it is “the most popular and rigorous form of probability sampling from a population” (Creswell, 2019, p. 141). Stratified random sampling could have allowed for a more equal self-esteem starting point for the abstaining group and the continuing group. However, the intent of this study was to design a true experiment and use the most rigorous type of sampling; therefore, simple random sampling was chosen.

### **Benefits**

There were multiple benefits to this study. First, students participating in this study had more awareness of their self-esteem. By completing the self-esteem survey in the pre-test and post-test, students were observing and self-reporting on their self-esteem. In this process, students also learned how social media connects to other areas of their lives. Some students reported better productivity, less comparison, and less anxiety while being off social media.

Another benefit of this study was the way these results can impact the work of professionals in higher education. Technology and social media continue to dominate culture, so professionals must maintain a thorough understanding of the social media and its relation to the lives of students. This study benefited both students and professionals.

### **Limitations**

The impact of COVID-19 and the length of this study were two of the key limitations. Students might be using social media more than ever with restrictions in place on in-person gatherings. A similar study may have different results when there is

not a global pandemic. Second, this study was only four weeks in length. It is difficult to know how much self-esteem can truly change in four weeks. In addition, self-esteem changes cannot be solely attributed to social media usage. There are other factors that need to be considered when observing self-esteem change. There are factors beyond the scope of this study that were not able to be controlled, such as academic load, job or internship placement, relational tension, and spiritual walk. These other variables may also impact one's self-esteem.

Finally, another limitation of this study was its self-reporting nature. This study is dependent on students accurately sharing the time they spent off social media. No person was tracking if students actually abstained from social media usage. The results are dependent on students honestly reporting how long they were off social media and what their experience was like.

## **Conclusion**

This study sought to answer the question: What impact does social media usage have on the self-esteem of college students? According to the results from this quantitative, true experiment study, social media usage does not impact the self-esteem of college students. The groups of students who abstained from social media and continued to use social media both had similar positive shifts in self-esteem over the four weeks of this experiment. Therefore, the conclusion from this study is that social media usage does not impact the self-esteem of college students.

The open-ended questions answered by the participants who abstained from social media for the four-week period provided additional insight to the experience of going off social media. Students in this group discussed how it was difficult to do at times, and they

felt disconnected from what was happening in the world. Participants also described better productivity, better time management, less anxiety, and less comparison. While this study indicated that social media usage does not impact self-esteem, there are still ways that social media usage impacts the lives of college students.

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## Appendix

### Survey Questions

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Students responded to each statement with a response of 1-Strongly Agree, 2-Agree, 3-Disagree, or 4-Strongly Disagree.)

1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on a equal plane with others.
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. I certainly feel useless at times.
10. At times I think I am no good at all.

Open Ended Survey Questions for Group that Abstained from Social Media Usage

1. What was your experience like discontinuing your social media usage?
2. Did discontinuing use of social media have an impact on your self-esteem? If so, how?
3. Did your view of yourself change over the four weeks? If so, how?
4. Would you encourage others to take breaks from social media? Why or why not?

5. Would you consider taking a break from social media again in the future? Why or why not?

