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## **An Unfiltered Reality: The Impact of Social Media Usage on Personal Satisfaction**

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An Unfiltered Reality: The Impact of Social Media Usage on Personal Satisfaction

University Honors Program Senior Thesis

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Submitted by:

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the present study was to determine the effects of social media use on the personal life satisfaction of emerging adults (ages 18 to 25). All told, 172 participants completed a survey that asked them to report their social media usage, social media habits, and their personal satisfaction with life. The social media use variables were reduced using exploratory factor analysis. This allowed a greater breakdown of the effects of social media habits across age and gender. Some gender differences emerged, but overall, social media use was negatively related to satisfaction with life. Additionally, other significant effects were found for personal satisfaction with life for the participants after accounting for age and gender. Notably, curating social media posts was a negative correlate of satisfaction with life. These findings highlight the effects that social media and social media habits can have on a person's satisfaction with life.

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### **An Unfiltered Reality: The Impact of Social Media Usage on Personal Satisfaction**

According to a statistic from Statista, it is stated that “In 2021, over 4.26 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost six billion in 2027” (Statista, 2022). With that many people constantly online and tapped into the lives of those other social media users, people have unprecedented access into the parts of a person’s life that they choose to post. Seeing the filtered lives of other people daily can no doubt make a person develop a sense of dissatisfaction with their lives and themselves in general. It is important to deconstruct the effects that these constant engagements have had on the mental health of emerging adults.

The overuse of social media has risen in prevalence and has led to researchers coining the term “social media fatigue” to discuss the outcome of feeling the need to constantly manage the image that a person promotes of themselves online (Alfasi, 2022). A study performed by Yitshaf Alfasi found that people who experience social media fatigue feel drained by the constant need to update others about their lives through social media, while also staying updated on the lives of others. He suggests that these activities drain a person’s mental energy and can lead to a social media addiction (Alfasi, 2022).

The study found that people affected by social media fatigue report having lower life satisfaction and lower well-being due to the social anxiety that excessive social media use causes (Alfasi, 2022). Personal life satisfaction is characterized by a person's evaluation of whether their needs or desires are being met (Hernandez & Chalk, 2021). Overall, Alfasi suggests “When anxiously attached individuals view their friends’ idealized selves on social media, they might feel they are less successful, and that their lives are generally less satisfying compared to the lives of their friends.” He continues by saying the over use of social media, “evokes constant

social comparison, [which] might lead to negative emotions such as jealousy, despair, and frustration” (Alfasi, 2022).

A study conducted by Abigail Hernandez and Holly Chalk from McDaniel College found that social media use and satisfaction with life were positively related. They also found that this relationship was strongest when participants listed their reason for social media use to be for maintaining connections. They argue that the connection between a person’s social media use and personal life satisfaction is more related to the reasons that the person is using social media and not how long they are spending on it (Hernandez & Chalk, 2021).

Bodroža and colleagues specifically look at the impact that posting on social media sites is related to a person’s self-esteem. Their study looks at the impact that active social media use (posting themselves) and passive social media use (looking at others) has on a person’s self-image. They argue that low self-esteem can be both a motivator for someone to post on social media and a negative consequence of doing so. Their research discusses previous findings that suggest that posting an image of a person’s own body on social media, regardless of if it had been previously edited, leads to feelings of increased anxiety. They also conclude that passive social media can lead to increased feelings of depression and body dysmorphia (Bodroža et al., 2022).

An additional study by Saeed and colleagues sought to determine whether or not a person’s personal satisfaction is affected by the content that they see on social media. They argue that “fulfillment of primary affective needs serves a major role in shaping our assumptions about the social world; which in turn, determines our patterns and trends of social interactions”. They suggest that our needs for personal satisfaction are a driving force for how we engage with social media. The study discusses a lot of information on how a person’s personal need to feel in the

loop with others is a driving force in social media use. The authors of the study contend that the satisfaction of this need increases personal satisfaction (Saeed et al., 2022).

### **Emerging Adulthood**

Emerging adulthood is characterized as the period of time when a person is between the ages of 18 and 25. During this period of a person's life, they engage in a variety of developmental tasks and explore their identities (Galambos et al., 2006). According to Galambos and her colleagues, "Even though there may be discontinuity in behaviors and role statuses as individuals pursue developmental tasks, the goal may remain continuous, that is, general adaptation" (Galambos et al., 2006). The period of emerging adulthood is crucial to the psychological development of a person and shapes how they perceive their identities.

Previous research into the topic of self-concept and identity suggests, "Developing self-concept clarity involves *identity integration*. Identity integration – the perceived compatibility between the various parts of oneself – includes both identity *coherence* and identity *confusion*" (Michnikyan, 2020). These two concepts relate to the ways in which individuals perceive their identity and how these perceptions align with their actual identities. A person who experiences identity integration understands the facets of their identity and the ways that they form who they are. A person who experiences identity confusion, does not understand these things (Michnikyan, 2020).

Michnikyan's 2020 study sought to identify the impact that social media has on the identity integration of emerging adults. The study found that participants with high reported levels of identity coherence were more likely to be honest when posting on their social media. Alternatively, participants with higher levels of reported identity confusion were more likely to be dishonest in their social media posts. The author of the study suggests that both of these

behaviors are caused by a form of identity self-monitoring that emerging adults employ on social media. He continues by acknowledging that,

Emerging adults are expected to experience some degree of social anxiety resulting from identity integration in the emerging adulthood transition (Ritchie et al., 2013). The finding that social anxiety was positively associated with online false self-presentation (exploration) implied that emerging adults who were feeling socially anxious might have also used social media to make meaning of who they were (Michnikyan, 2020).

The findings of the survey suggest that false social media self-presentation is linked to feelings of social anxiety. Michnikyan suggests that social media site developers should integrate more mindfulness-based activities and positive identity development strategies, which he believes will help the mental health of emerging adults experiencing identity confusion (Michnikyan, 2020).

Global events have had an impact on both the amount of time that people on average spend on social media and the effects that it has had on them. A study conducted by Sarwar et al. explores the contribution that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the effects of social media usage. The researchers suggest that overexposure to social media and the presentation of false information contribute negatively to the psychological health of the viewer. They state that the spreading of false information regarding the pandemic “has been linked with causing a state of panic in people that also led to the adverse psychological impact” (Sarwar et al., 2022). The results of the study found that people who were overexposed to social media during the pandemic reported higher levels of depression but not anxiety. This is suggested to be due to information that is spread on social media, which has caused unhappiness with a person’s current life.



## **Present Study**

The present study sought to determine the relationship that emerging adults have between social media and personal satisfaction with their lives. Specifically, the survey collected information from the participants that would help determine if there is any link between the time that a person spends on social media, their habits while engaging in social media, and the levels of personal satisfaction that they feel in their lives. It was hypothesized that the more time a participant spent on social media, the less satisfied that they would be with their lives.. Alternatively, it was theorized that women would engage in more social media habits that would cause them to have a lower personal satisfaction than men.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 187 participants completed some aspect of the survey. Participants were all undergraduate psychology and/or University Honors Program students at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Participants were emerging adults, aged 18 to 25 years old. The mean age of participants was 20.6 years old. Participants were recruited through a link posted on the canvas pages of undergraduate psychology courses or through the weekly University Honors Program email.

The reported genders of the participants were 34 men, 131 women, six non-binary, and one who did not say. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 with an average age of 20.6 years old. The demographic information of the participants can be found in Table 1.

### **Procedure**

Participants were directed to the survey through a link distributed to a link posted on the canvas pages of undergraduate psychology courses or through the weekly University Honors

Program email. First, the participants were asked to complete demographic information regarding their age and gender. Following this, the next question asked the participants to estimate the average amount of time that they spent on social media sites per day. The participants had options that ranged between less than one hour to more than five hours. The next question asked the participants to discuss their social media habits. This was done by a series of 18 sub questions that targeted different social media habits (i.e. I use social media sites daily, I use multiple social media sites per day, etc.). Participants responded to these questions using a sliding scale to rank each question as strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree or disagree, agree, or strongly agree. The following question asked the participants to discuss their personal satisfaction through five sub questions. The responses were collected in the same method as the previous question. The final question asked the participants how they heard about the survey (either through a psychology class or through the University Honors Program). Participants were thanked for their participation.

A total number of 187 ( $M = 20.60$ ,  $S.D. = 1.66$ ) students initially participated in the survey. Due to incompleteness of the survey or not being considered an emerging adult (18-25 years old), 15 participants had to be removed from the data set. This left a total of 172 usable participants to analyze. Furthermore, a lack of a representative population for non-binary participants ( $n=6$ ) and limitations with the data software led to a removal of this demographic from data analysis relating to gender differences. One participant also failed to report their gender, so their results were not included in any data analysis relating to gender differences.

## **Materials**

Qualtrics was utilized to create the survey that was sent to the participants. This service is provided by the University of Nebraska at Omaha for use by the students. It allowed for easy

distribution of the survey and data collection. Participants were prompted through questions and asked to provide responses. SPSS and Microsoft Excel were used to analyze the data and provide results for the survey responses.

### **Satisfaction With Life Measure**

Satisfaction with life was gauged using a series of 18 questions (See Appendix B). Participants were asked to answer each question using a sliding scale. Each question was answered as 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). A cronbach's alpha test ( $\text{Alpha} = .75$ ) was run to ensure the internal consistency of the questions being asked. This ensured that the results of a question would not skew the data of the entire question set. Additionally, some questions (i.e. Sometimes I feel useless) needed to be reverse coded to ensure that all questions would have the participants respond on the same scale. This made sure all results in the set were consistent.

### **Social Media Use Scale**

Social media use was collected using a group of 5 questions (See Appendix A). Participants were asked to answer each question using a sliding scale. Each question was answered as 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree).

### **Data Reduction**

The social media use variables were reduced using exploratory factor analyses. One principal factor emerged, specifically, for social media use overall. This composite was calculated using the average of most of the scale items (Question 1, Question 2, Question 4, Question 6, Question 8, Question 9, Question 11, Question 12, Question 14; Chronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ). Other composites were created based on the remaining items, specifically, using social media for

information (Question 5, Question 7, Question 10,  $\alpha = .70$ ). A composite of social media use for enjoyment was also created (Question 13 and Question 15,  $\alpha = .54$ ). The degree to which participants curated their social media profile was also assessed (Question 17, Question 18,  $\alpha = .71$ ). Meanwhile, using social media for work (Question 3) and honesty on social media (Question 16) were measured using a single item for each.

### Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations of the study variables are provided in table 2. Interestingly, social media use was negatively related to satisfaction with life ( $r = -.22, p < .05$ ). In other words, more social media use was tied to lower satisfaction with life. Additionally, older participants reported significantly less social media use overall ( $r = -.30, p < .05$ ), less social media use for information ( $r = -.22, p < .05$ ) and less enjoyment using social media ( $r = -.19, p < .05$ ).

Mean gender differences were compared using independent samples t-tests. Notably, men ( $M = 3.29, S.D. = .66$ ) reported significantly more satisfaction with their lives ( $t(163) = 2.85, p < .05$ ) than women ( $M = 2.89, S.D. = .73$ ). Furthermore, women ( $M = 3.72, S.D. = .66$ ) reported spending significantly more time on social media ( $t(41.88, \text{one-tailed}) = -1.68, p = .05$ ) than men ( $M = 3.47, S.D. = .87$ ). Women ( $M = 3.69, S.D. = .86$ ) also used social media for information ( $t(161) = -1.99, p = .05$ ) significantly more than men ( $M = 3.34, S.D. = 1.04$ ). Additionally, women ( $M = 2.81, S.D. = 1.20$ ) reported curating their social media posts significantly more ( $t(147) = -4.19, p < .05$ ), compared to men ( $M = 1.98, S.D. = .87$ ). There were no other gender differences in any of the remaining variables.

Hypothesis testing was conducted using multiple regression of satisfaction with life as the criterion variable adding the social media variables in separate blocks. In the first block, age and

gender were included as covariates. As evidenced by the t-tests, men reported more satisfaction with life ( $b = -.14$ ,  $\beta = -.18$ ,  $t = -1.98$ ,  $p = .05$ ). In addition, there was now an effect of age ( $b = .09$ ,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $t = 2.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). To explain, older participants reported more satisfaction with life. This first block accounted for 6.20% of the variability in satisfaction with life.

In the second block, the social media use variable was added next. As evidenced by the correlations, there was no significant association between social media use ( $b < -.01$ ,  $\beta < -.01$ ,  $t = -.04$ ,  $p > .05$ ) with satisfaction with life. In other words, those participants who reported using social media more did not report any more or less satisfaction with life. As such, this second block accounted for .00% additional variability in satisfaction with life.

In the third model, social media use for information purposes was the main variable added. Again, there was no significant effect ( $b = -.16$ ,  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t = -1.76$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Although not significant, the association in general was negative in that those who used more social media for information reported lower satisfaction with life. This third block accounted for an additional 2.50% of the variability in satisfaction with life ( $F(1,115) = 3.09$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

For the fourth block, social media curation and social media enjoyment were included as correlates, above and beyond the other effects. It was found that there was a significant effect between people who curated their social media posts and satisfaction with life ( $b = -.17$ ,  $\beta = -.30$ ,  $t = -2.99$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This suggests that people who curate their social media posts are less satisfied with their lives. Additionally, there was a significant effect between people who use social media for enjoyment and satisfaction with life ( $b = .26$ ,  $\beta = .35$ ,  $t = 2.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In other words, people who enjoy using social media reported having a higher satisfaction with life. This fourth block accounted for an additional 9.60% of the variability in satisfaction with life.

In the fifth block, social media honesty and the use of social media for work were added. There was no significant effect found for social media honesty ( $b = .03, \beta = .05, t = .51, p > .05$ ). This means that there was no significant difference in satisfaction with life between participants who are honest on social media and those that are not. In addition, there was no significant effect found for participants who use social media for work ( $b = -.03, \beta = .05, t = .51, p > .05$ ). As such, there was no difference in satisfaction with life between participants who use social media for work and those that do not. This fifth block accounted for an additional .50% of the variability in satisfaction with life.

In the sixth model, the interactions between gender and the social media use variables were included. One effect, though strictly not significant ( $b = .03, \beta = 1.03, t = 1.88, p = .06$ ), was worth exploring (see figure 1), specifically the gender by social media honesty interaction. In particular, men who reported more social media honesty appear to have less satisfaction with life than women who reported similar levels of social media honesty. The inclusion of the gender interactions explained an additional 3.90% of the variability in satisfaction with life.

Finally, the age interactions were included in the final model with no significant effects. This final block explained an additional 3.60% of the variability in satisfaction with life. All told, the resulting model accounted for 11.40% of the differences between participants in satisfaction with life, which was a good fit to the data ( $F(20,119) = 1.76, p < .05$ ).

## **Discussion**

The current study found several relationships that reveal the link between social media and personal satisfaction. Firstly, it found that social media use was negatively associated with satisfaction with life, which suggests that people who use social media more have lower personal satisfaction with life. When looking into age, older participants reported using social media less

overall, using social media for information, and less social media enjoyment. It was also found that women spent more time on social media and reported curating their social media posts more than men. However, men reported having a significantly higher satisfaction with their lives than women. Additionally, participants who reported enjoying social media had a higher satisfaction with life than those who did not. Meanwhile, those who reported curating their social media posts more had a lower satisfaction with life.

Both hypotheses were supported by the results of the analyses of the survey data. Higher social media use was associated with a lower personal satisfaction with life. Additionally, women engaged in more social media habits than men and had a lower personal satisfaction than the male participants. However, these differences were not observed in the final model. It is possible that external factors in the lives of the female participants contributed to a lower personal satisfaction with life.

The findings of the study were consistent with the findings of previous literature. Similar to Alfasi's findings, spending more time on social media led to less personal satisfaction with life. Additionally, Hernandez and Chalk's findings that social media habits can have more of an effect on a personal life satisfaction than the amount of time spent on the sites was also supported. While there was an overall negative association between social media use and personal satisfaction with life, some social media habits did not contribute to lower satisfaction. Participants in the study who reported using social media for enjoyment also reported a higher satisfaction with life. The findings of the study also support those of Galambos and colleagues and the study performed by Michikyan. People who curated their posts for social media reported having less personal satisfaction than those who did not.

One strength of this study was the ability to group social media habits together using exploratory factor analysis to further elucidate the results. This allowed more precise evaluations of the social media habits of the participants. These groupings were formed using a cronbach's alpha analysis to determine which habits were most alike.

Another strength of the study was the number of overall participants who participated in the study. While certain demographics were under-represented in the survey, there was a large enough sample size to get adequate results for how social media affects a person's satisfaction with life. Regardless of gender or age differences, there was a large number of emerging adults who were willing to participate in the survey.

There were some limitations with the current study. One limitation came from the demographics of the participants, which were majority women. Additionally, all participants were either enrolled in a Spring 2023 psychology class or a member of the University Honors Program at a single university. This population cannot be assumed to have the same social media habits and personal life satisfaction of all emerging adults. These factors affect the generalizability of the results found in the survey as not all demographics are adequately represented.

Additionally, aspects of the study methods are limitations that should be changed for future studies. Settings within the Qualtrics survey allowed participants to selectively answer questions. This led to some participants having to be removed from the study for not completing enough questions. Additionally, some questions had fewer responses when compared to others. Since an established scale was not used for these questions, some important details in the results could have been missed. Nevertheless, the measures were all tested for reliability.



The effects of social media use on emerging adults is a complicated and multifaceted issue. Both time spent on social media and habits on social media have an effect on a person's satisfaction with life. It is important to remember that outside factors not discussed in this study can have an effect on the personal life satisfaction of emerging adults. However, the results of this study suggest that social media factors contribute to a negative personal life satisfaction for both genders of emerging adults.

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**Table 1***Demographic Information*

Characteristic				
	<u><i>M (SD)</i></u>			
<u>Age</u>	20.6 (1.66)			
	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Non-Binary</u>	<u>No Response</u>
<u>Gender</u>	34	131	6	1
	<u><i>N</i></u>			
<u>Total Participants</u>	172			

*Note.* *N* = total number of participants, *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation.

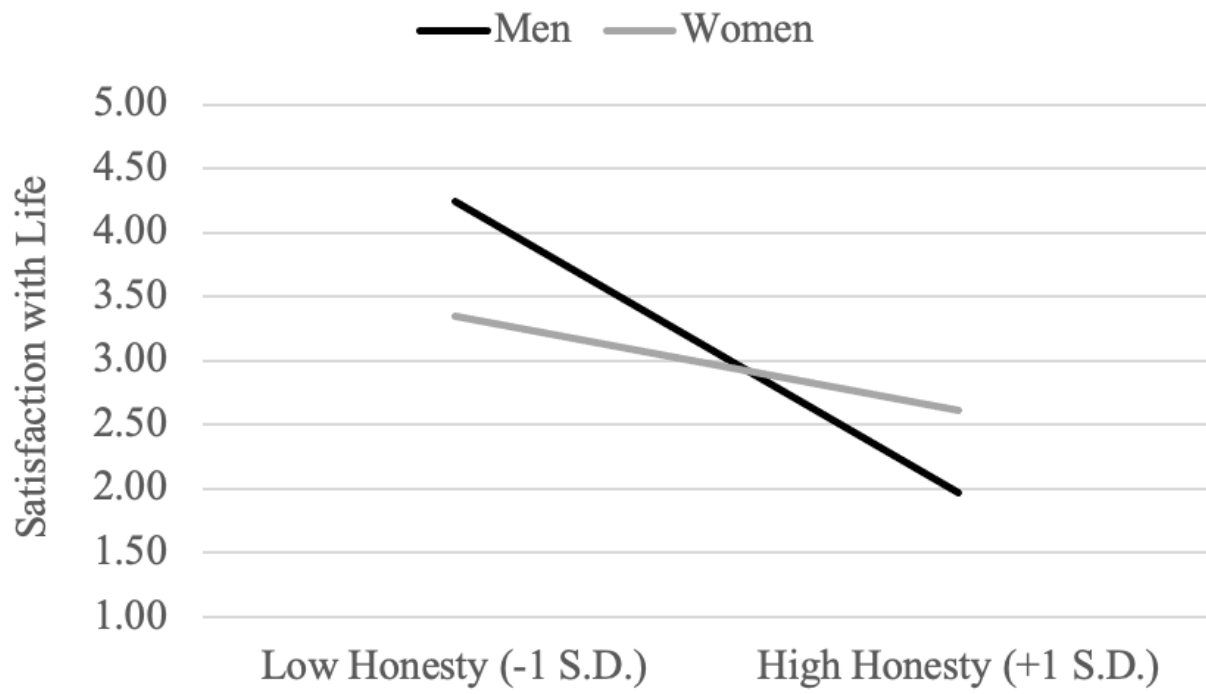
**Table 2**  
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Satisfaction with Life	172	2.97	0.73	—							
2. Age	160	20.60	1.66	.08	—						
3. Refined Social Media Use	171	3.68	0.70	-.13	-.30**	—					
4. Social Media for Information	170	3.60	0.91	-.22**	-.22**	.63**	—				
5. Social Media for Enjoyment	168	3.57	0.97	.05	-.18*	.65**	.33**	—			
6. Social Media Curating	156	2.64	1.19	-.19*	.06	.36**	.25**	.36**	—		
7. Social Media for Work	137	2.26	1.17	-.05	-.06	.26**	.34**	.18*	.20*	—	
7. Social Media Honesty	169	3.86	1.08	.11	< .01	.23**	.08	.25*	-.05	-.05	—

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

**Figure 1**

*Gender differences in the association between social media honesty and satisfaction with life*



## Appendix A

Answer the following questions regarding your social media habits using the following scale:  
1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree or disagree), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree)

### Social media frequency

1. I use social media sites daily
2. I use multiple social media sites per day

### Reasons for using social media

3. I use social media for entertainment
4. I use social media for work
5. I use social media to connect with friends and family
6. I use social media to gain information
7. I use social media for entertainment
8. I use social media for knowledge of trends
9. I use social media for purposes of wellness (physical or mental)
10. I use social media to meet new people
11. I use social media to gain ideas
12. I use social media to see new places
13. I like viewing my friend's and family's posts

### Personal social media use

14. I post on social media often
15. I enjoy posting on social media
16. I am honest when I post on social media
17. I use a filter when I post on social media
18. I edit photos before posting on social media

## Appendix B

Answer the following questions regarding your personal satisfaction using the following scale:  
1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree or disagree), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree)

### Satisfaction with life

1. I am satisfied with my life
2. I sometimes feel useless
3. I would change parts of my life if given the opportunity
4. I am satisfied with my physical appearance
5. I am satisfied with my mental health